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MONICA
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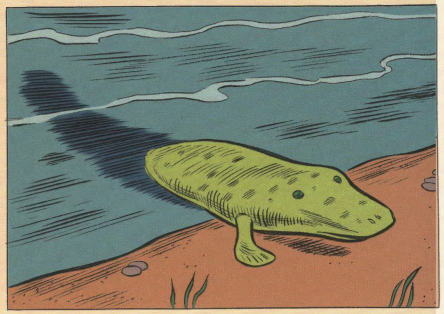

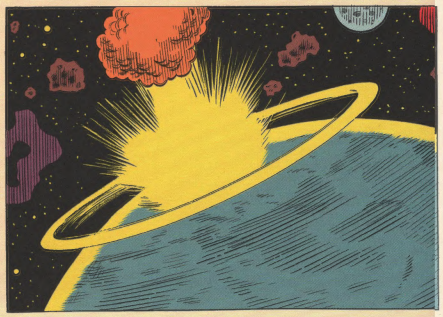

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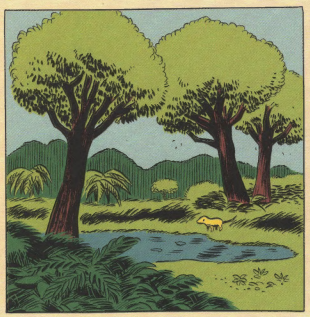

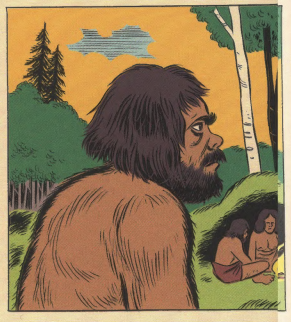

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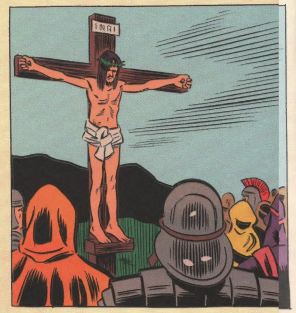

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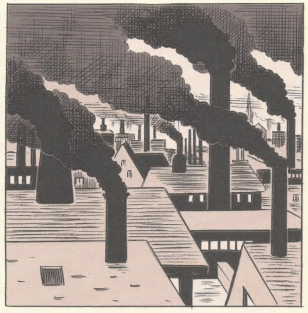

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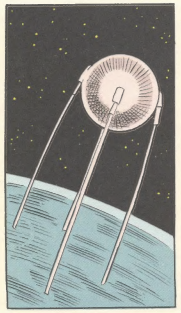

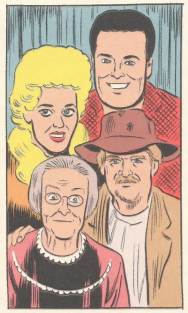

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FOXHOLE
THIS IS THE LIFE, EH JOHNNY?
WHEN I WAS A KID, I COULDN'T WAIT FOR THIS. "I GET TO KILL PEOPLE AND BLOW UP THEIR SHIT? SIGN ME THE FUCK UP!"
I MEAN, ARE YOU KIDDING?
BOOM
I USED TO LIE AWAKE THINKING ABOUT ALL THE FUCKERS I COULD HUNT DOWN. HAD A WHOLE LIST. BUT THEY DON'T LET YOU SHOOT THOSE ASSHOLES, DO THEY?
HOW DOES IT FEEL, JOHNNY? STUCK IN THIS STINKIN' MUDHOLE WITH A LOW-BORN SWAMPRAT LIKE ME? EQUALS! BROTHERS IN ARMS!
FEELS BAD.
BOOM
BACK HOME, I'D BE NOTHING TO YOU. SOME CROSSEYED MOUTHBREATHER, COOLING HIS HEELS IN THE GUTTER. I'D BE LUCKY IF YOU LET ME FIX YOUR DADDY'S BUICK.
MY OLD MAN BUYS CHEVYS.
TRUTH IS, WE MESSED UP. BOTH OF US. GOT PLAYED FOR EASY MARKS; A COUPLE PLASTIC ARMY MEN IN SOME RICH FUCKER'S TOY BOX.
DON'T LET FINLEY HEAR YOU TALK LIKE THAT.
BOOM

FINLEY CAN KISS MY ASS!
FUCK YOU, FINLEY!
BOOM BOOM BO
YOU BELIEVE IN GOD, DON'T YOU, JOHNNY?
I DO.
RATATATA
DO YOU?
I WAS BORN METHODIST. UNITED HOPE CHURCH. PLAYED SECOND BASE ON THEIR PONY LEAGUE TEAM FOR THREE SEASONS.
THEN WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID TO DIE?
BOOM
WHAT ABOUT YOU? YOU'RE JUMPY AS HELL!
I KNOW. THAT'S MY POINT!
RATATATAT
SOMETIMES I GET SO SCARED... NOT OF DEATH, BUT...
I DON'T KNOW, JOHNNY...
BOOM
I MEAN, YEAH, I TALK A LOT. A LOT OF STUPID OPINIONS. IT'S ALL BULLSHIT, WHO CARES? I KNOW I DON'T REALLY KNOW ANYTHING, BUT THIS IS REAL, JOHNNY, A FEELING FROM DEEP DOWN IN MY SOUL!
RATATATAT
RATATATAT
BOOM
THERE'S A DARKNESS COMING, LIKE A THICK BLACK CLOUD. IT'S JUST HANGING THERE, OVER PAST THE HILL, OUT OF SIGHT...
YOU HAVING THE NIGHTMARES AGAIN?
PKOW!
IT'S A PREMONITION, JOHNNY. AN OMEN. I CAN'T EVEN TALK ABOUT WHAT ALL I'VE SEEN.

LISTEN TO ME, BUTCH: ONE DAY THIS IS ALL GONNA BE OVER. WE'RE GONNA PACK UP OUR GEAR, SHAKE HANDS, AND HEAD BACK HOME TO REAL LIFE. EVERYTHING NICE AND NORMAL.

PKOW

MAYBE FOR YOU. WHAT THE HELL AM I EVEN FIGHTING FOR?

BECAUSE YOU BELIEVE IN FREEDOM AND HONOR AND ALL THAT GOOD SHIT, JUST LIKE THE REST OF US.

PKOW PKOW

BE SERIOUS, MAN.

I AIN'T THE ONE WITH THE PROM-QUEEN PUSSY WAITING BACK HOME!

TREAD VERY FUCKING LIGHTLY, PAL.

RATATATAT BOOM

THIS IS YOUR WORLD, JOHNNY. A GUY LIKE YOU COULD DRY-HUMP THE GODDAMN STATUE OF LIBERTY IF HE FELT LIKE IT!

PKOW RATATATAT BOO

ALL I'M LOOKING FOR IS A SIMPLE LIFE: PENNY AND I GET MARRIED, RAISE A FEW KIDS. A HOUSE, A JOB; NOTHING FANCY.

PKOW

I'M THINKING I'LL GET A MOTORCYCLE. MY UNCLE'S GOT A RUSTY INDIAN HE'D SELL ME CHEAP.

SPEND MY DAYS ALONE, RAISING HELL. MAYBE ROB A FEW BANKS AND LIVE IN THE WOODS.

PKOW

YOU'RE GONNA MEET A GIRL WHO CAN PUT UP WITH YOUR SHIT. WIND UP FAT AND HAPPY, JUST LIKE ME.

BOOM

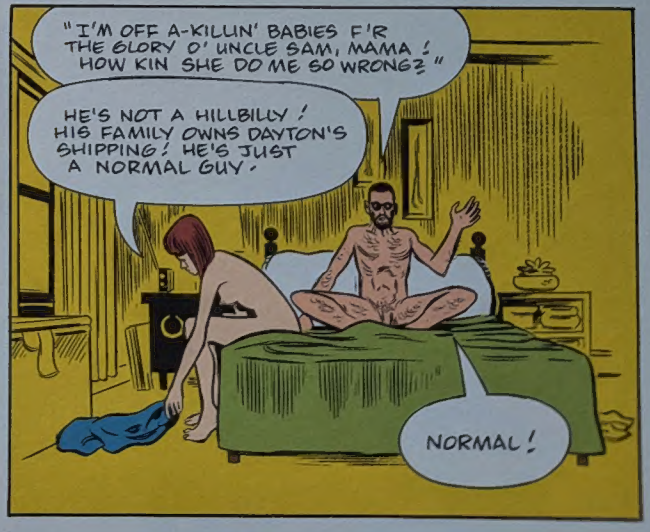
PKOW RATATATAT BOO

IN MY DREAM, THE CLOUD FINALLY COMES IN, TURNING THE SKY ALL RED. THERE'S A TERRIBLE RAIN OF FIRE AND BLOOD AND THE WORLD OPENS, LIKE A WOUND IN THE SOIL.

EVERYTHING WE EVER LOVED OR CARED ABOUT IS BURIED, RUINED, GONE FOREVER.

IN MEMORIAM
ALLISON, JIMMY,
RICHARD AND GARY
ALL LOST DURING THE
MAKING OF THIS BOOK

PRETTY PENNY

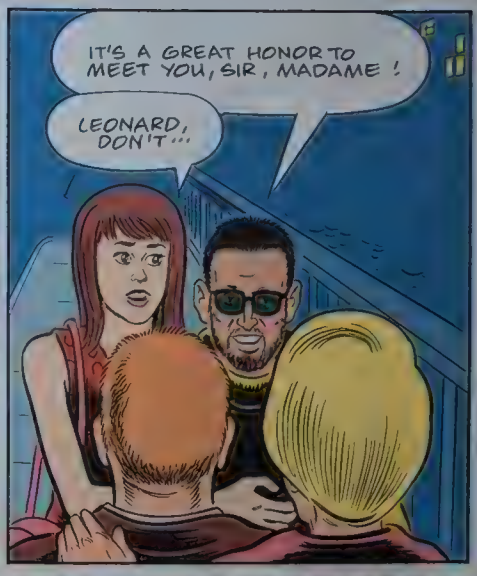

"I'M OFF A-KILLIN' BABIES F'R THE GLORY O' UNCLE SAM, MAMA! HOW KIN SHE DO ME SO WRONG?"
HE'S NOT A HILLBILLY! HIS FAMILY OWNS DAYTON'S SHIPPING! HE'S JUST A NORMAL GUY.
NORMAL!

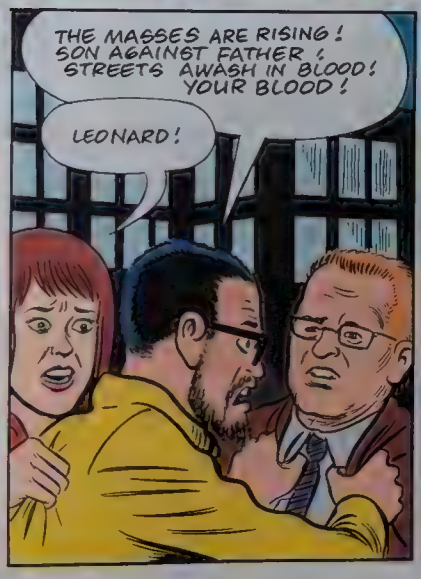
SO IT'S NORMAL TO MURDER INNOCENT STRANGERS FOR A POLITICAL STRATEGY EVEN THE GENERALS DON'T UNDERSTAND? HOLY CHRIST, ARE YOU NORMAL?
PROBABLY.
YOU ARE FAR FROM FUCKING NORMAL. I SEE A FEROCIOUS TIGRESS, PACING AROUND HER CAGE, THIRSTY FOR BLOOD.
AND YOU?
I'M BUT AN INNOCENT LAMB, A HAPLESS ZOOKEEPER WHO FORGOT TO LOCK THE GATE.
HEY!
THAT TICKLES!
DO YOU WANT TO TAKE SOME DOPE? SOME CIRCUS FREAKS ARE HAVING A PARTY TONIGHT.
REAL CIRCUS FREAKS?
IF ONLY. ART COLLECTORS, PURE HUMAN TRASH.
ALPHA BITS
OKAY...?
OKAY, THEN.
HA!
NOW WHAT?
I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS ME!

BEFORE ALL THIS, PENNY HAD BEEN AN ART MAJOR - POTTERY AND TEXTILES - JUST PASSING TIME UNTIL HER FIANCÉ GOT BACK FROM THE WAR. SHE HAD MET LEONARD KRUG AT A GALLERY OPENING. "YOU NEED HELP," HE SAID, AND POINTED TO A SMALL ABSTRACT ON THE WALL. "THAT PAINTING IS ABOUT YOU," HE SAID. A FEW DAYS LATER, SHE FOUND IT LEANING AGAINST HER DOOR.
IT WAS A GROUP SHOW AT THE GRIFFIN. I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW HE WAS A FAMOUS ARTIST!
"FAMOUS"!
BUT YOU SAID IT YOURSELF - "WE'RE ALL THE SAME." THE REVOLUTIONARY IS NO DIFFERENT FROM THE OVERLORD. WE ALL WANT TO BE ON TOP OF THE HIERARCHY - IF WE CAN'T BE RICHER OR STRONGER, WE'LL BE MORALLY SUPERIOR.
HORSESHIT!
HISTORY IS A PENDULUM, COMRADE!
EVERYBODY ASKS MEN "WHAT DO YOU DO? WHAT'S YOUR LINE?" WITH WOMEN, IT'S ALWAYS "ARE YOU MARRIED? KIDS? WHO ARE YOU DATING?"
THAT'S SO TRUE - THE FIRST THING YOU ASKED ME WAS HOW I MET LEONARD!
OOOH! SHE GOT YOU!
OH NO, I DIDN'T MEAN YOU WERE -
NO APOLOGIZING! THAT'S ANOTHER WAY THEY'VE BRAINWASHED US!
SO... WHAT DO YOU DO, PENNY?
GOSH...
"GOSH"!
ARE YOU A BAD PENNY OR A PRETTY PENNY?
WELL, A FEW WEEKS AGO I THOUGHT I HAD MY LIFE ALL FIGURED OUT, BUT NOW I DON'T KNOW. I'M NOT SURE WHAT I AM ANYMORE. AN ARTIST, I GUESS?
YOU SAVED ANOTHER ONE, LEONARD!

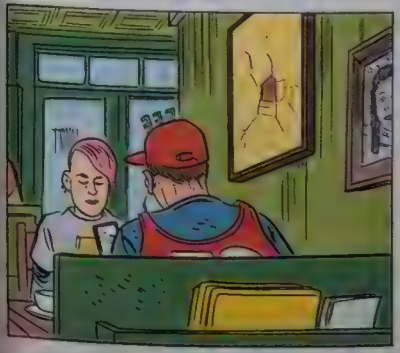
THAT WAS AMAZING! YOU HAVE THE COOLEST FRIENDS!
"FRIENDS"? THOSE HEAD-LICE? HOW DARE YOU!
I FEEL SO GOOFY AND WEIRD. I MUST REALLY BE STONED!
DON'T YOU LOVE RICH PEOPLE? THEY'RE SO HAPPY AND THEY SMELL GREAT! THEY DONATE TO THE OPERA!
WE HAVE TO WARN THEM ABOUT THE REVOLUTION!
ATTENTION, BARONS OF INDUSTRY: DOOM IS NIGH!
BOARD YOUR WINDOWS!
SHH!
HOW MUCH OF THAT STUFF DID YOU SMOKE?
A LOT
OH BOY... I NEED TO GET YOU HOME.
CAREFUL, BABY - I'M A HEARTBREAKER. I'M BAD NEWS, BABY...
PENNY?
OH, MY GOD!
WHAT THE HELL IS THIS, PENNY?

I WAS JUST... THIS ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK... I-
FOR CHRIST SAKES, PENNY, JOHNNY'S OVER THERE RISKING HIS ASS SO WE CAN ALL-
JOHNNY'S PARENTS!





SOMETIME SOON AFTER THAT, LEONARD SEEMS TO HAVE DISAPPEARED. NOBODY FROM THE OLD DAYS CAN REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED. A FEW OF HIS PAINTINGS ARE STILL AROUND, BUT THAT'S ABOUT IT.



GOOGLE IS TOTALLY USELESS. NORMAL PEOPLE WHO LIVED PRE-INTERNET ARE MOSTLY NON-EXISTENT, IT TURNS OUT.

LEONARD T. KRUG

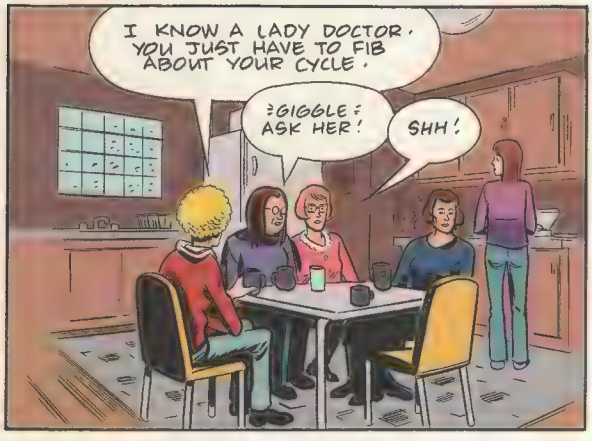
LEONARD L. KRUG

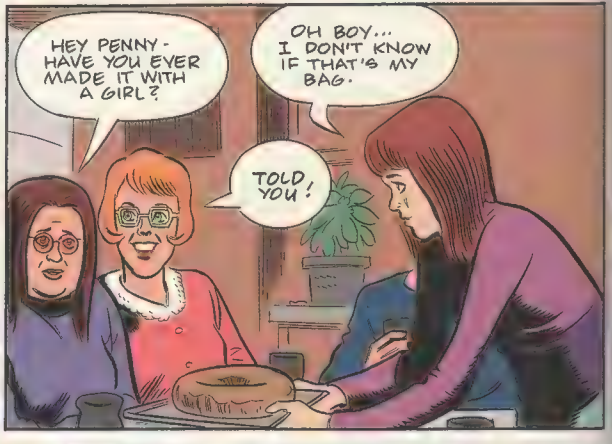
LEO KRUG, D.D.S.

J.R. LEONARD-KRUG

I DON'T REALLY EVEN KNOW WHAT HE LOOKED LIKE, TO BE HONEST. "SORT OF A BEATNIK-TYPE, A BIT OLDER AND MORE CYNICAL THAN THE HIPPIES," "A REAL BULL-IN-A-CHINA-SHOP KIND OF GUY," A DIMESTORE DIONYSUS(?)" ANYWAY, THIS ISN'T HIS STORY, IS IT?

IT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT INVENTION OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY!
I THOUGHT YOU COULD ONLY GET IT IF YOU WERE MARRIED?


I KNOW A LADY DOCTOR. YOU JUST HAVE TO FIB ABOUT YOUR CYCLE.
:GIGGLE: ASK HER!
SHH!


HEY PENNY - HAVE YOU EVER MADE IT WITH A GIRL?
OH BOY... I DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S MY BAG.
TOLD YOU!

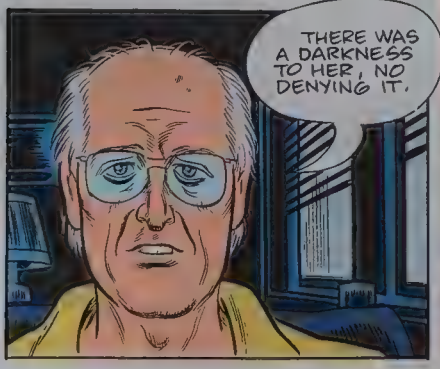
IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU'RE INTO. THAT'S NOT THE POINT. THE ONLY THING I'M ABOUT - AND I REALLY GOD DAMN MEAN IT - IS THAT IT'S OUR DUTY TO DROP ALL THE GUILT AND SHAME AND ALLOW OURSELVES SOME GODDAMN PL
RING

ARRGH - SORRY!
RING
LESLIE'S LOST AGAIN!

HELLO?
OH, HI... LOOK, I CAN'T-
LOOK... MOTHER- I'M IN THE MIDDLE OF -
WHY? SO YOU CAN KEEP LECTURING ME?
IT'S TOO LATE FOR THAT. I ALREADY SENT THE LETTER!
I TOLD YOU!
SO I CAN DO WHAT I WANT WITH MY OWN LIFE!
YES!
SO I DON'T WIND UP FUCKING MISERABLE LIKE YOU!
SO I CAN FUCK WHOEVER THE FUCK I WANT!
AAARGHH!
SLAM!
OUT OF
WOW, PENNY...
YOU'RE A TRIP!

TWENTY MONTHS LATER, I WAS BORN. NOT ONLY WAS PENNY ON THE PILL, BUT SHE WAS KNOWN TO USE "SPERMICIDAL JELLY" (YUM) AND SEVERAL SPURIOUS HIPPIE HERBS FOR ADDED BACK-UP. "SHE REALLY DID NOT WANT A BABY," SAID EVERYONE I ASKED, BUT NO ONE COULD SAY WHY SHE DIDN'T GET AN ABORTION. POSSIBLY, IT WAS A FUCK YOU TO MY "DAD," WHO HAS NEVER EVEN SEEN ME, OR HER PARENTS, OR JUST TO AMERICA IN GENERAL.
FUCK YOU, AMERICA IN GENERAL.
CUSTOM

OBVIOUSLY I DON'T REMEMBER THOSE DAYS, SO THIS HISTORY IS COBBLED FROM THE SELF-SERVING MEMORIES OF OLD WEIRDOS WHO TOOK A LOT OF DRUGS.



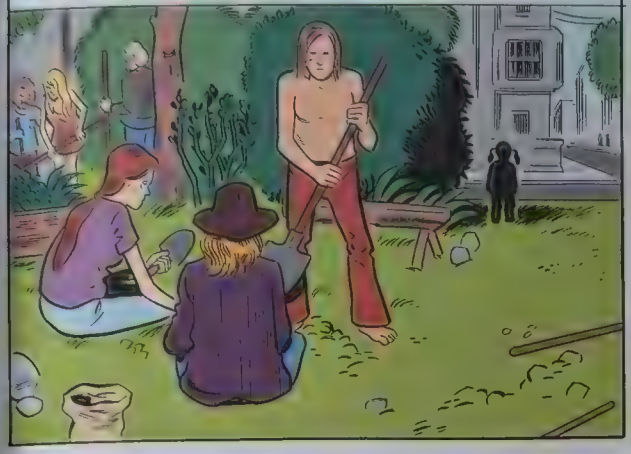
SHE HAD COMPLETELY CUT ALL TIES WITH MY GRANDPARENTS, AND SO MY LIFE BEGAN IN A COMMUNAL APARTMENT WITH ANOTHER COUPLE AND THEIR TWO FERAL BOY-CHILDREN.

THAT LASTED A YEAR (ISH? NOBODY REMEMBERS), BUT THE DAD WAS FOREVER TRYING TO BONE POOR PENNY (YAY SEXUAL REVOLUTION) AND THE KIDS WERE HORRIFYING.

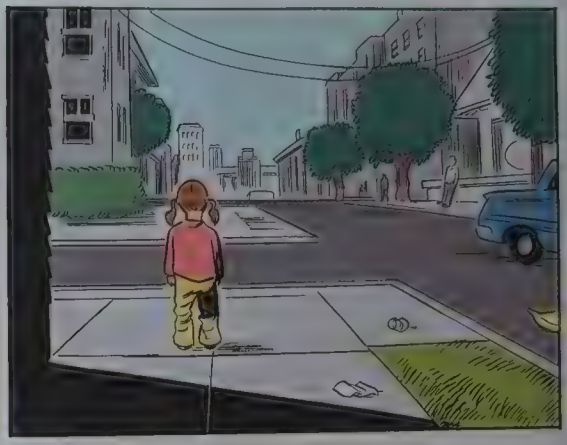
AFTER THAT, WE LIVED WITH JEANNE. SHE WAS ON WELFARE WITH SOME ILLNESS, SO WE WATCHED TV ALL DAY LONG WHILE PENNY WORKED AT VARIOUS LOW-PAYING JOBS.

ONE DAY, I REALIZED I WAS BASICALLY A STAY-AT-HOME MOM. THAT'S WHEN IT STARTED TO GO SOUTH.
WE HAD FUN, THOUGH. YOU USED TO HELP ME SIFT THE POT SEEDS!

MY FIRST REAL MEMORY IS OF BEING AT A PARK WHERE SOME HIPPIES WERE PLANTING A COMMUNITY GARDEN. MY MOM WAS BUSY, SO I WENT LOOKING FOR OTHER KIDS TO PLAY WITH.



SOMEHOW, I WOUND UP ACROSS THE STREET, TOTALLY LOST. I REMEMBER JUST STANDING THERE, TERRIFIED, LIKE I WAS STUCK IN A TERRIBLE DREAM.

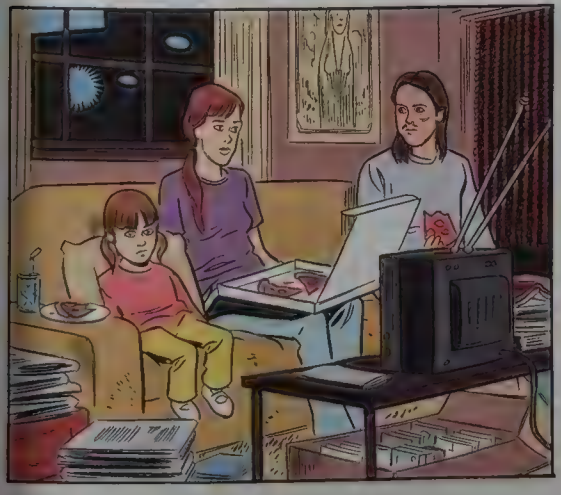


FINALLY, SOME WEIRD OLD GUY CAME OVER TO HELP ME.

HE TOOK ME BACK AND STARTED LAYING IN TO MY MOTHER.

THANKFULLY, THIS SKINNY JAMES TAYLOR ESQUE DUDE STEPPED IN TO CALM THINGS DOWN BEFORE PENNY WENT TOTALLY BERSERK.

LATER, WE WENT TO HIS PLACE TO WATCH LAUGH-IN, I REMEMBER FEELING SO HAPPY AND SAFE! A FEW WEEKS LATER, PENNY AND I MOVED IN.



DAVIS WAS A WRITER FOR A RADICAL NEWSPAPER (AN ACTUAL PAYING JOB BACK THEN) BUT HIS REAL PASSION - WHICH HE TOOK TO WITH HEARTY DEVOTION - WAS IN HELPING PENNY TO FULFILL HER DREAMS.

WEIRDLY, THAT DREAM WAS TO OPEN A CANDLE SHOP! WE SPENT THE WHOLE SUMMER CREATING INVENTORY WITH OUR FELLOWS IN THE ARTISTIC CHANDLERY COMMUNITY.

BEST DAMN WICKLAYER I EVER KNEW...

DAVIS FOUND HER A LITTLE STOREFRONT IN THE GROSS, MOLDERING DEATH-TRAP THAT HOUSED THE WEEKLY OVERTHROW OFFICES AND SOME OTHER JIVE-ASS STORES.

Monica's CANDLES

COMING SOON

NAMED AFTER ME! I WAS SO PROUD.

IT WAS A THRILLING TIME FOR PENNY. SHE WAS SO HAPPY TO BE THE BOSS OF SOMETHING.

GRAND OPENING

DURING HER LONG HOURS AT THE SHOP, DAVIS AND I WERE STUCK AT HOME TOGETHER. HE WOULD READ BORING BOOKS AND WATCH BORING TV SHOWS WHILE I STARED AT HIS BIZARRELY-HUGE ADAM'S APPLE.

I'M THE ONLY MAN WHO EVER TREATED YOUR MOTHER RIGHT. YOUR OWN FATHER WAS

I WISH TO GOD I COULD REMEMBER WHAT HE SAID!

HE AND PENNY FOUND A CONNECTION IN THEIR SHARED COMMITMENT TO THE NOBLE CAUSES OF THE DAY, THOUGH DAVIS ALWAYS MADE IT CLEAR THAT HIS UMBRAGE WAS THE PUREST OF ALL.

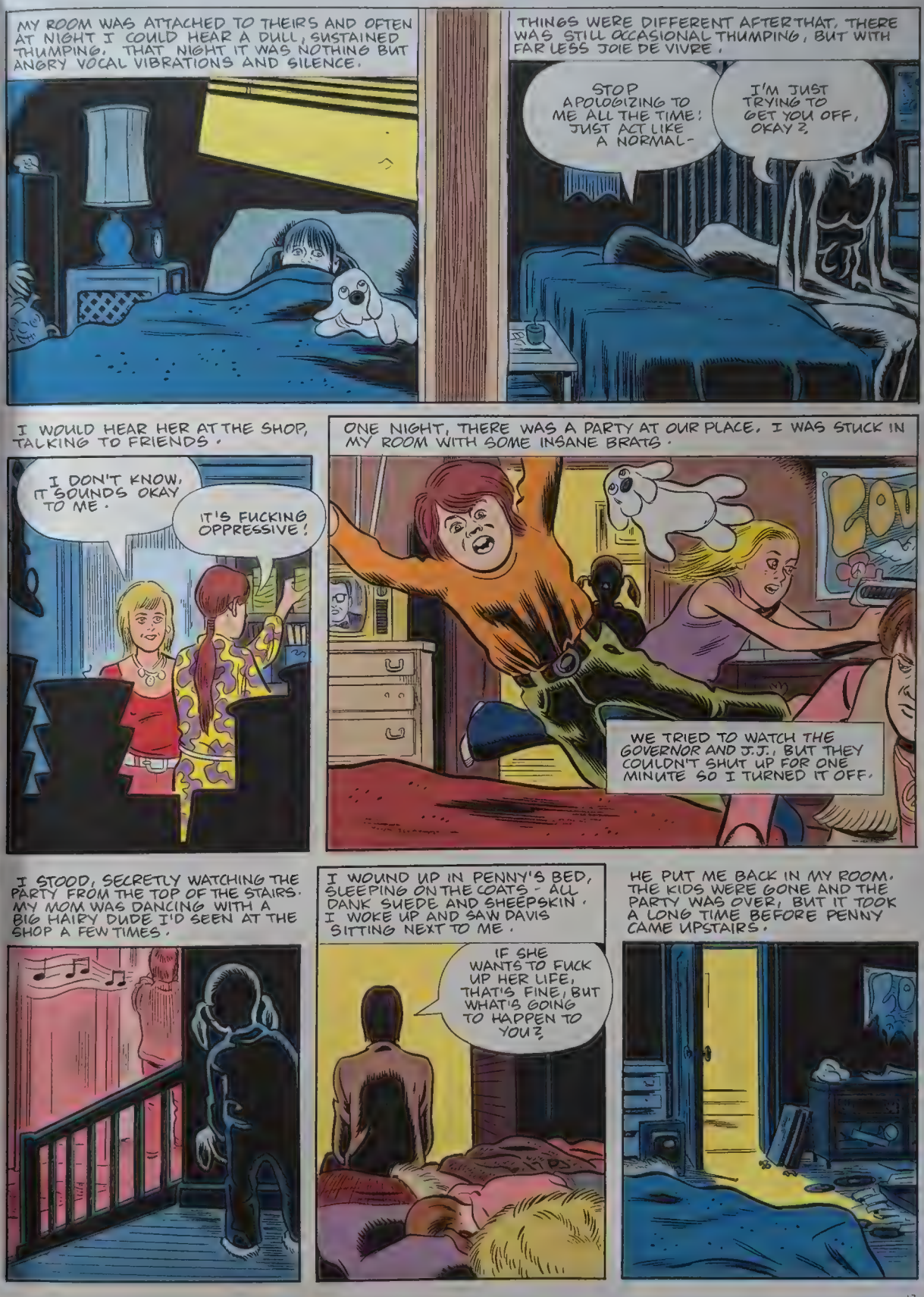
... HE'S JUST A SLIGHTLY LESS-VENAL FASCIST!

ONE NIGHT, HE CRASHED HER IRONICALLY-NAMED SEWING CIRCLE, LISTENING QUIETLY AS THE LADIES LAUGHED AND VENTED, BONDING OVER THE INJUSTICES THAT PERSISTED EVEN IN THOSE ENLIGHTENED DAYS.

I WANTED TO TELL HIM "OKAY BUDDY, WHY DON'T YOU WEAR A FUCKING TUBE-TOP AND I'LL-

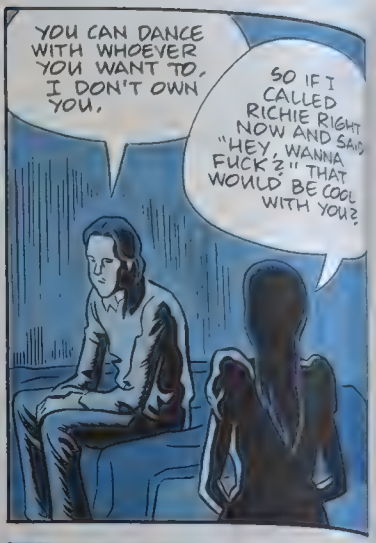
HEY, IS HE CRYING?

WHAT THE FUCK?

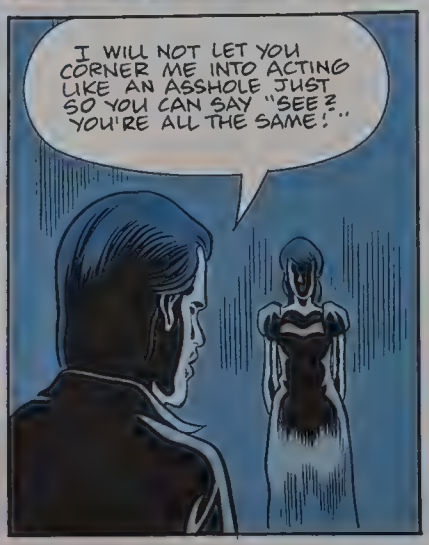

MY ROOM WAS ATTACHED TO THEIRS AND OFTEN AT NIGHT I COULD HEAR A DULL, SUSTAINED THUMPING. THAT NIGHT IT WAS NOTHING BUT ANGRY VOCAL VIBRATIONS AND SILENCE.
THINGS WERE DIFFERENT AFTER THAT. THERE WAS STILL OCCASIONAL THUMPING, BUT WITH FAR LESS JOIE DE VIVRE.
STOP APOLOGIZING TO ME ALL THE TIME! JUST ACT LIKE A NORMAL-
I'M JUST TRYING TO GET YOU OFF, OKAY?
I WOULD HEAR HER AT THE SHOP, TALKING TO FRIENDS.
I DON'T KNOW, IT SOUNDS OKAY TO ME.
IT'S FUCKING OPPRESSIVE!
ONE NIGHT, THERE WAS A PARTY AT OUR PLACE. I WAS STUCK IN MY ROOM WITH SOME INSANE BRATS.
WE TRIED TO WATCH THE GOVERNOR AND J.J., BUT THEY COULDN'T SHUT UP FOR ONE MINUTE SO I TURNED IT OFF.
I STOOD, SECRETLY WATCHING THE PARTY FROM THE TOP OF THE STAIRS. MY MOM WAS DANCING WITH A BIG HAIRY DUDE I'D SEEN AT THE SHOP A FEW TIMES.
I WOUND UP IN PENNY'S BED, SLEEPING ON THE COATS - ALL DANK SUEDE AND SHEEPSKIN. I WOKE UP AND SAW DAVIS SITTING NEXT TO ME.
IF SHE WANTS TO FUCK UP HER LIFE, THAT'S FINE, BUT WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO YOU?
HE PUT ME BACK IN MY ROOM. THE KIDS WERE GONE AND THE PARTY WAS OVER, BUT IT TOOK A LONG TIME BEFORE PENNY CAME UPSTAIRS.

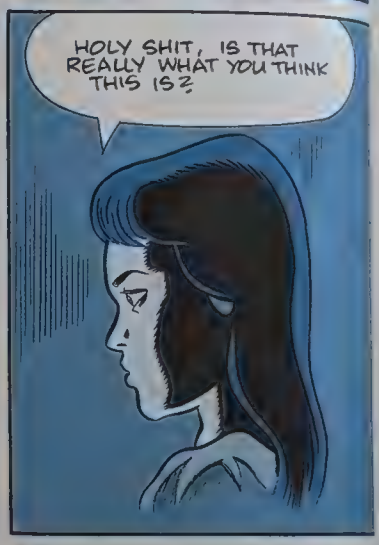
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU? WHERE DID YOU GO?
UP HERE. I PUT MONICA TO BED.
ARE YOU MAD?

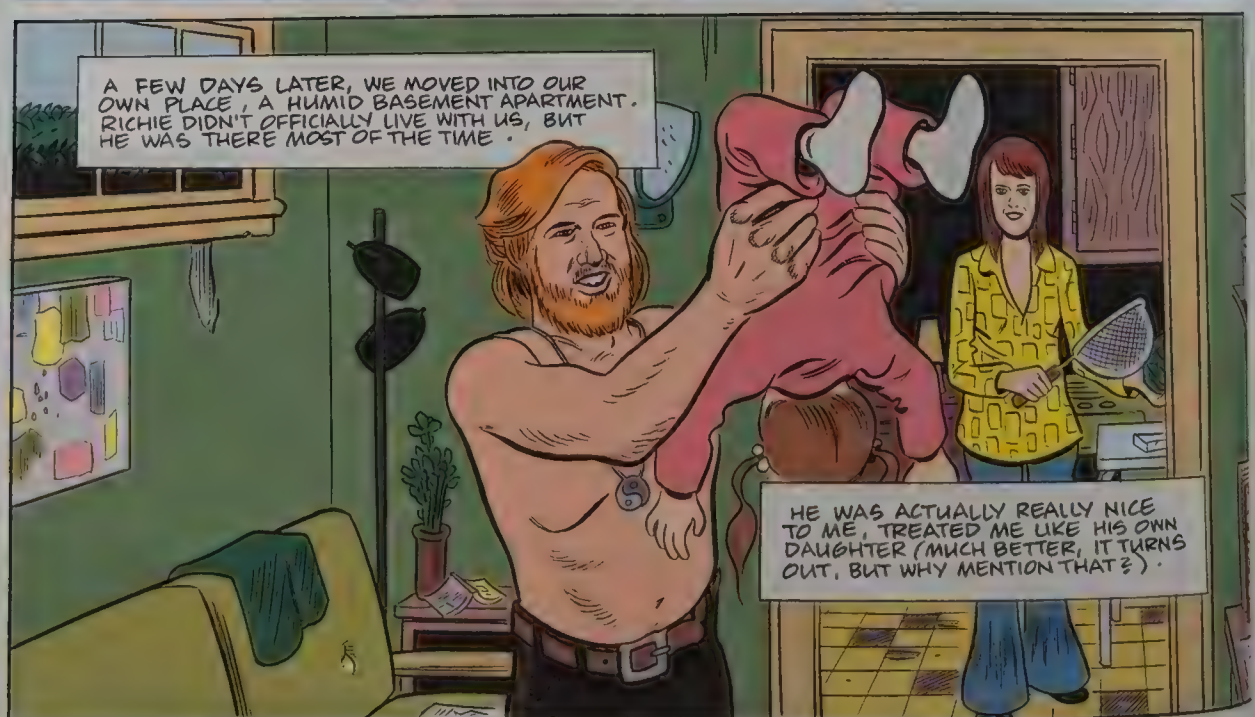
WHY WOULD I BE MAD?
BECAUSE I WAS DANCING WITH RICHIE?


YOU CAN DANCE WITH WHOEVER YOU WANT TO. I DON'T OWN YOU.
SO IF I CALLED RICHIE RIGHT NOW AND SAID "HEY, WANNA FUCK?" THAT WOULD BE COOL WITH YOU?

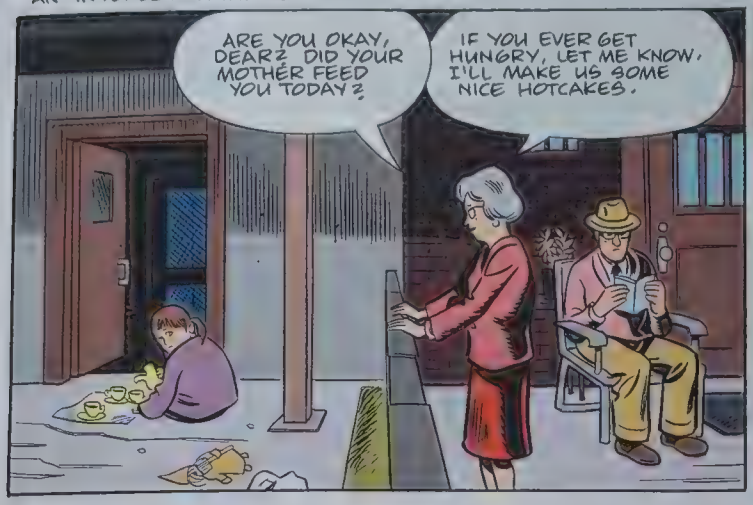
THERE FOLLOWED A LONG SILENCE.
WHY ARE YOU SUCH A FUCKING PUSHOVER? WHY CAN'T YOU ARGUE WITH ME?


I WILL NOT LET YOU CORNER ME INTO ACTING LIKE AN ASSHOLE JUST SO YOU CAN SAY "SEE? YOU'RE ALL THE SAME!"


HOLY SHIT, IS THAT REALLY WHAT YOU THINK THIS IS?

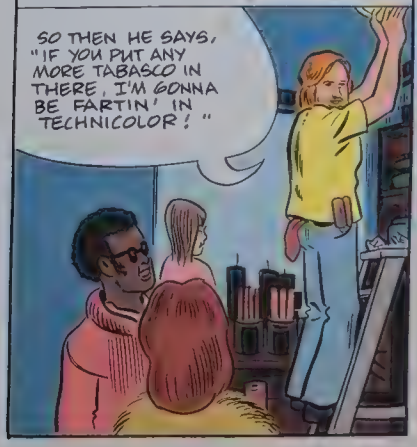

A FEW DAYS LATER, WE MOVED INTO OUR OWN PLACE, A HUMID BASEMENT APARTMENT. RICHIE DIDN'T OFFICIALLY LIVE WITH US, BUT HE WAS THERE MOST OF THE TIME.
HE WAS ACTUALLY REALLY NICE TO ME, TREATED ME LIKE HIS OWN DAUGHTER (MUCH BETTER, IT TURNS OUT, BUT WHY MENTION THAT?).

THERE WAS A LITTLE CEMENT COURTYARD IN THE BACK WHERE I SPENT MY DAYS. THE POLISH COUPLE NEXT DOOR BEGAN TO TAKE AN INTEREST IN MY WELFARE.



ANOTHER TIME, THEY TRIED TO GIVE ME A WINTER COAT AND PENNY FLIPPED OUT.

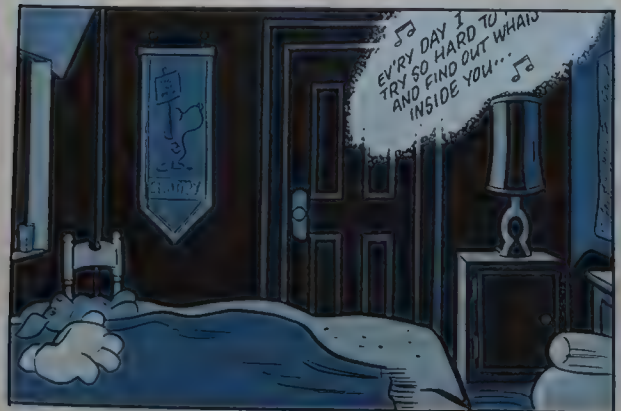
OTHERWISE, THINGS WERE GOOD. RICHIE USED HIS MANLY SKILLS TO FIX UP THE CANDLE SHOP AND HE WAS A BIG HIT WITH THE CUSTOMERS.



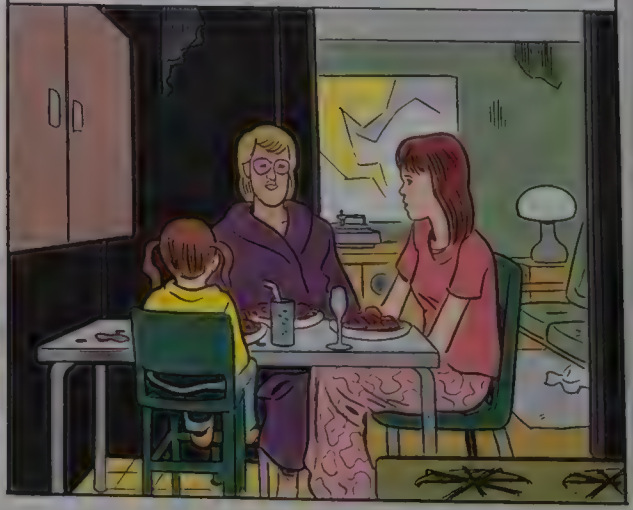
HE WAS A SIMPLE MAN ("EARTHY," AS THE SOPHISTICATES CALLED HIM), KIND OF A REDNECK, ACTUALLY, BUT LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, HE GOT CAUGHT UP IN THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES.

ONE NIGHT, HE AND PENNY HAD A STRANGE (IN ALL WAYS) COUPLE OVER FOR DINNER.

PENNY TUCKED ME IN AND TOLD ME NOT TO BUG THEM. I WAS ALREADY VERY SHY, SO I KNEW I'D BE TOO SCARED TO GO IN ANYWAY. THEY WERE PLAYING RECORDS ON AN AUTOMATIC TURNTABLE, "SURREALISTIC PILLOW" OVER AND OVER. I KEPT PRAYING (REALLY PRAYING, ON MY KNEES) THAT SOMEONE WOULD FINALLY LIFT THE NEEDLE.



A FEW DAYS LATER, RICHIE WAS GONE AND THE CREEP HAD MOVED IN.



THUS BEGAN A SEASON OF DOOM. THE CREEP WAS REPLACED BY "PIGSTY," AKA "DR. FEELBAD," AND THEN CAME THE AVALANCHE, AN ENDLESS CASCADE OF HIRSUTE SUITORS AND FREAKY FLATMATES.

HEY-YA, KIDDO.

I'M AFRAID YOU'RE GOING TO GROW UP THINKING ALL MEN ARE JUST SELFISH ASSHOLES... OR THAT YOU EVEN NEED SOME FUCKING MAN IN THE FIRST PLACE!

FOR ALL I KNOW, I'M TOTALLY SCREWING YOU UP FOREVER.

IN LATE DECEMBER, SOMEBODY FELL ASLEEP SMOKING A JOINT IN THE OVERTHROW OFFICE AND THE WHOLE BUILDING WENT UP IN FLAMES.

PENNY BLAMED DAVIS FOR THE FIRE. WE DIDN'T CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS.

DID THE STORE MELT INTO ONE BIG GIANT CANDLE?

I COULDN'T STOP HER FROM CRYING NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRIED!

ON THE 25TH, THE NEIGHBORS LEFT A GIFT-WRAPPED DOLL FOR ME ON THE BACK MAT. I DIDN'T EVEN GET TO OPEN IT ALL THE WAY.

WHAT THE FUCK!?

WHY ARE YO INFLICTING Y VALUES ON

A FEW DAYS LATER, I HEARD PENNY ON THE PHONE WITH OUR LANDLORD (WHO I STILL PICTURE AS SNIDELY WHIPLASH), BEGGING HIM NOT TO THROW US OUT IN THE STREET. THAT NIGHT I GAVE HER THE SOCK FULL OF PENNIES I WAS SAVING, WHICH PRETTY MUCH DID HER IN.

ON NEW YEAR'S EVE, SHE VOWED TO GET HER SHIT TOGETHER, ONCE AND FOR ALL.

THE NEXT MORNING, SHE APPLIED FOR HER OLD JOB AT THE SUNSHINE SUPERMAN. EIGHTY CENTS AN HOUR PLUS TIPS.

CLANG CLANG

BOOM

MY DAYS THEREAFTER WERE SPENT WITH BENNIE THE BABYSITTER, WHO HAD SAT FOR MY MOM WHEN SHE WAS LITTLE AND IN NO WAY APPROVED OF THE ADULT VERSION.

WHILE BENNIE WAS NAPPING, I WOULD TIDY UP THE FILTHY APARTMENT, DESPERATE FOR SOME SENSE OF ORDER.

THINGS WERE TOUGH. PENNY WAS FRAZZLED AND MISERABLE, BARELY KEEPING IT TOGETHER. I PRAYED AND PRAYED TO THE HEAVENLY FATHER.

AND LO, THERE CAME IN THAT DARKEST HOUR A MIRACLE.

AND JUST LIKE THAT, EVERYTHING CHANGED.

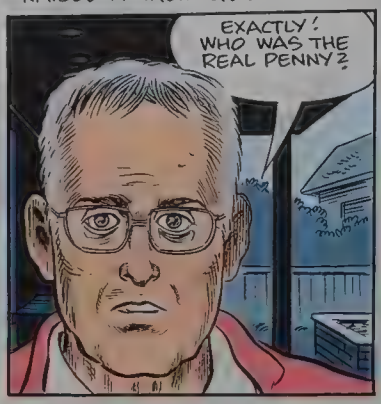
SHE WAS RIGHT ABOUT THAT. EVEN WITH THE LEATHER VEST AND SIDEBURNS, JOHNNY HAD A VERY DIFFERENT VIBE FROM THE OTHERS (NOT TO MENTION A JOB, A BANK ACCOUNT, A RAZOR...).

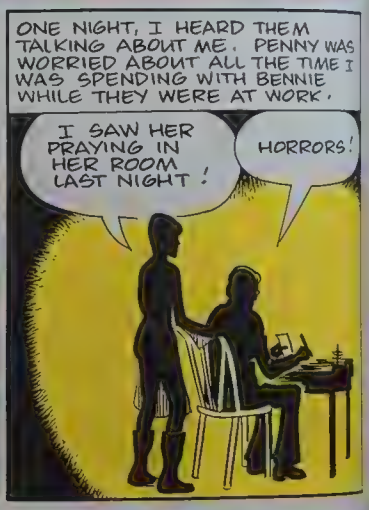
THE NEXT FEW MONTHS WERE A HAPPY BLUR, A GOLDEN AGE. THERE WAS A NEW HOUSE, CLOTHES, STOREBOUGHT NON-EDUCATIONAL TOYS. PENNY AND I WERE STRESS-FREE FOR ONCE, HAPPY TO JUST BE NORMAL.

DURING THIS TIME, I WAS LITERALLY OBSESSED WITH MY MOTHER; A DESPERATE, SEETHING PASSION.
YOU'RE SO PRETTY, MOMMY!
♫ I LOVE MY MO-MMY. I LOVE MY MOM. I LOVE MY- ♫
YOU'RE SILLY.
BUT I REALLY REALLY REAL
REALLY REA

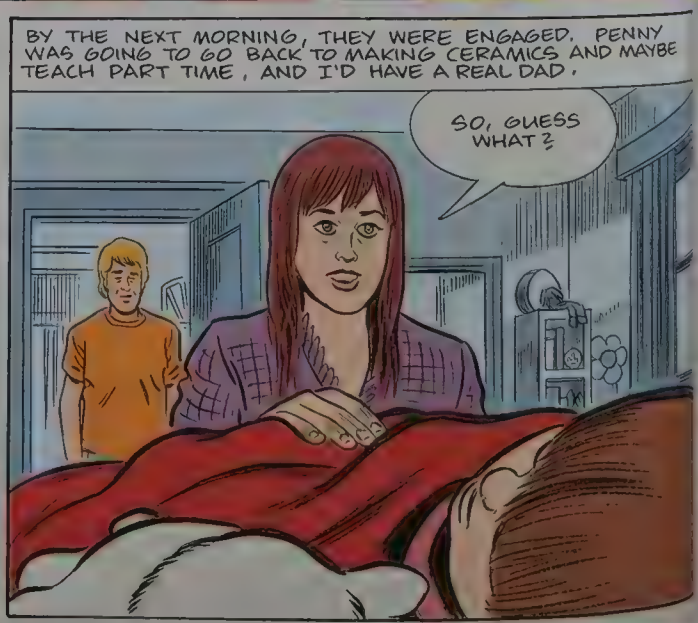
ALL THIS CONTENTMENT TOOK ITS TOLL ON POOR PENNY, THOUGH. SHE BEGAN TO POKE AROUND FOR SORE SPOTS, TESTING JOHNNY'S RESOLVE.
HOW CAN YOU ALWAYS BE SO CALM AND LEVEL-HEADED AFTER ALL THE HORRIBLE SHIT YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH? SOMETIMES I WORRY YOU'RE GOING TO SNAP AND MURDER US IN OUR SLEEP!

LUCKILY, HE COULD TAKE A PUNCH.
I KNOW YOU FOR WHO YOU REALLY ARE, BEFORE YOU GOT ALL SWEPT UP IN THE FLOWER POWER STUFF.


HE WAS PROBABLY THINKING OF HIMSELF WHEN HE SAID THAT (I.E. "YOU KNEW ME BEFORE I NAPALMED BABIES") BUT IT RAISED A VALID QUESTION:
EXACTLY! WHO WAS THE REAL PENNY?

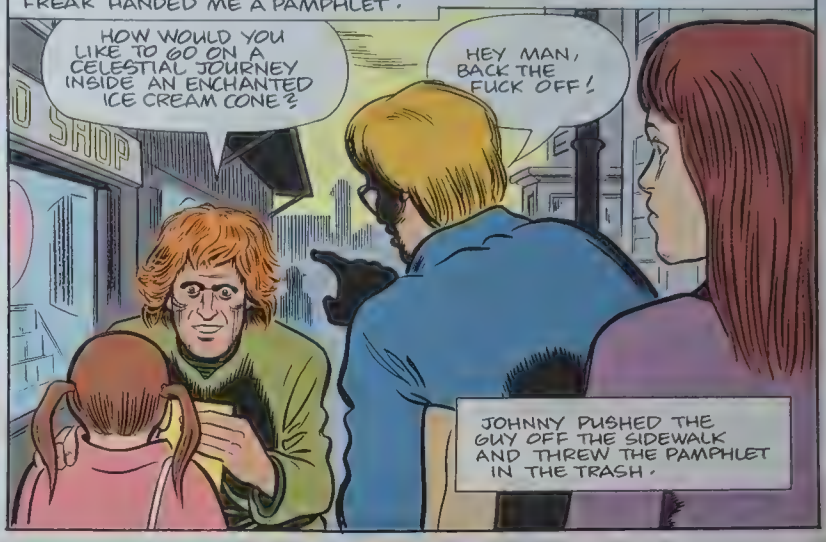

ONE NIGHT, I HEARD THEM TALKING ABOUT ME. PENNY WAS WORRIED ABOUT ALL THE TIME I WAS SPENDING WITH BENNIE WHILE THEY WERE AT WORK.
I SAW HER PRAYING IN HER ROOM LAST NIGHT!
HORRORS!

PENNY TRIED TO SPIN IT INTO AN ARGUMENT, BUT JOHNNY HAD AN IMPOSSIBLY HIGH THRESHOLD FOR ANGER. I ONLY SAW HIM BLOW HIS TOP ONE TIME.
IF YOU WANT, YOU COULD JUST QUIT YOUR JOB AND -
I AM NEVER GOING TO MAKE MYSELF VULNERABLE LIKE THAT AGAIN! WE'RE NOT EVEN MARRIED - YOU COULD EASILY J


BY THE NEXT MORNING, THEY WERE ENGAGED. PENNY WAS GOING TO GO BACK TO MAKING CERAMICS AND MAYBE TEACH PART TIME, AND I'D HAVE A REAL DAD.
SO, GUESS WHAT?

THE WEDDING WAS SCHEDULED FOR THE FOLLOWING FRIDAY. JOHNNY'S PARENTS HATED PENNY ALMOST AS MUCH AS HER OWN, SO IT WAS JUST GOING TO BE THE THREE OF US AT CITY HALL.

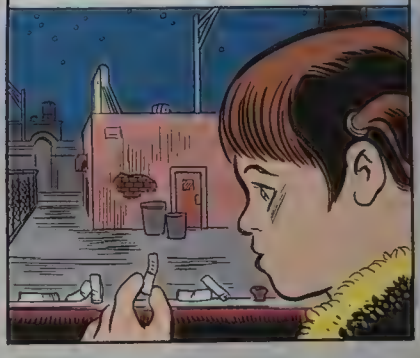
WE WENT AND BOUGHT PENNY AN OLD VICTORIAN WEDDING DRESS AT THE AMVETS DOWNTOWN. ON THE WAY HOME, SOME BURNED-OUT FREAK HANDED ME A PAMPHLET.


HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO ON A CELESTIAL JOURNEY INSIDE AN ENCHANTED ICE CREAM CONE?
HEY MAN, BACK THE FUCK OFF!
JOHNNY PUSHED THE GUY OFF THE SIDEWALK AND THREW THE PAMPHLET IN THE TRASH.

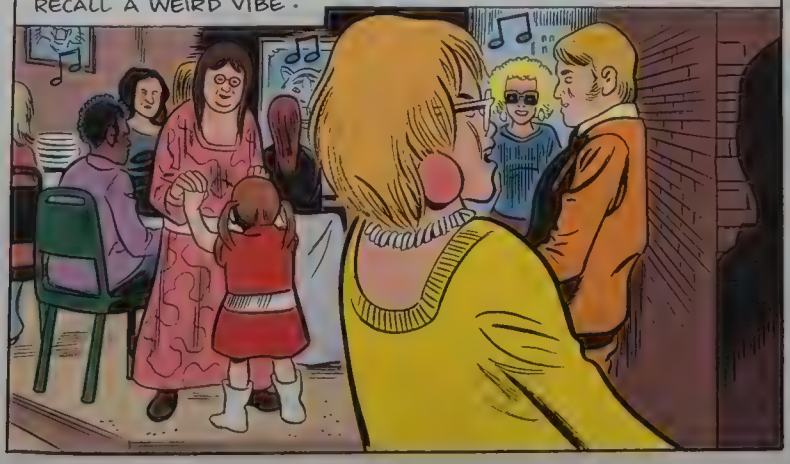
I RAN BACK AND GRABBED IT, SHOVING THE CRUMPLED WAD IN MY LITTLE MACRAMÉ PURSE.

AFTER THAT, ALL MY PRE-WEDDING MEMORIES ARE SPOTTY AND SUSPECT, MORE LIKE A DREAM OR ONE OF MY STORIES THAN REAL LIFE.

I HAVE ONE CLEAR IMAGE OF SITTING FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE HOURS LOCKED IN THE CAR WHILE PENNY WENT ON SOME ERRAND. I GOT SO BORED, I TOOK ALL THE CIGARETTE BUTTS OUT OF THE ASHTRAYS AND PRETENDED THEY WERE ZOO ANIMALS.

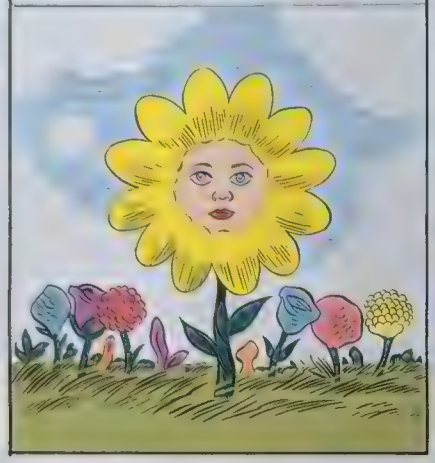


THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING, WE HAD A LITTLE PARTY AT JANE LEE'S. I REMEMBER HAVING A GREAT TIME, BUT OTHERS RECALL A WEIRD VIBE.

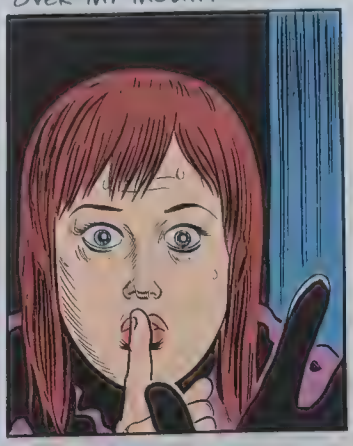


I STAYED UP LATE TRYING ON OUTFITS, FINALLY SETTLING ON MY TURQUOISE DRESS. IT WAS ALMOST LIKE I WAS THE ONE GETTING MARRIED TOMORROW.

IT WAS HARD TO GET TO SLEEP, BUT AFTER A WHILE I FINALLY DRIFTED OFF. I STILL REMEMBER MY DREAM.

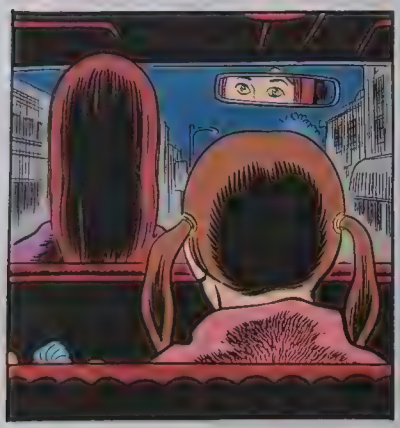


LATER, PENNY CAME INTO MY ROOM. SHE WAS DRIPPING WET, ICE COLD, TREMBLING. SHE PUT HER CLAMMY HAND OVER MY MOUTH.



SHE CARRIED ME OUT TO THE CAR. I COULD HEAR JOHNNY SNORING AS WE TIPTOED PAST THEIR ROOM.

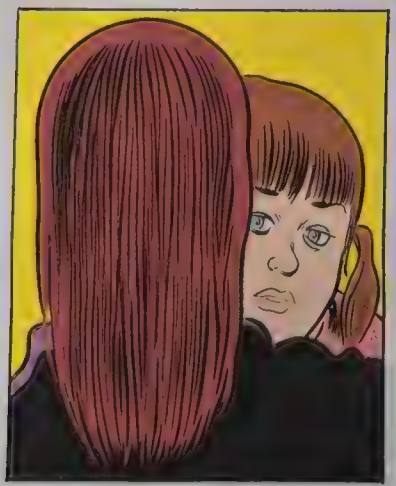
IN THE CAR, THERE WERE TWO GROCERY BAGS WITH ALL MY STUFF, AND HER OWN SUITCASE. SHE WAS TALKING SLOWLY, DRY-MOUTHED, TELLING ME A STORY I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND.



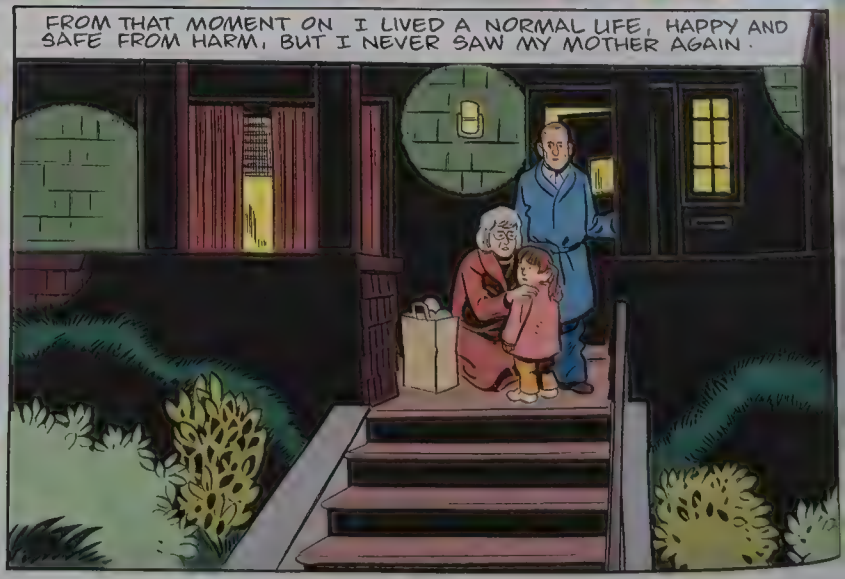
IN MY MEMORY, THE UNCRUMPLED PAMPHLET WAS NEXT TO ME ON THE BACK SEAT, BUT THAT ALWAYS SEEMED WEIRD.

SHE PARKED AND WENT WITH THE TWO BAGS UP TO A GREEN-SHINGLED HOUSE. I WAITED WHILE SHE RANG THE BELL.

SHE CAME BACK AND CARRIED ME, SILENT AND STICKY WITH STALE SWEAT, UP THE STAIRS TO HER CHILDHOOD HOME.

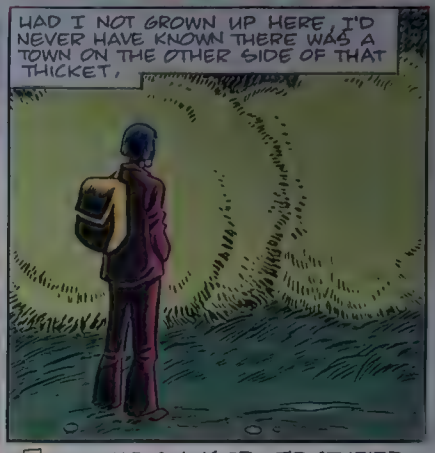


FROM THAT MOMENT ON I LIVED A NORMAL LIFE, HAPPY AND SAFE FROM HARM. BUT I NEVER SAW MY MOTHER AGAIN.



THE GLOW INFERNAL

SO MUCH HAD CHANGED IN THE FOUR YEARS I'D BEEN GONE. THE RAILROAD HAD STOPPED RUNNING, FOR ONE, AND WHAT REMAINED OF THE TRACKS NOW LAY RUSTED AND BROKEN UNDER THE WEEDS. THERE WAS NO SIGN OF THE OLD STATION HOUSE, AND THE MAIN ROAD HAD BEEN WIPED OUT IN SOME KIND OF AVALANCHE...



I TOO HAD CHANGED. I'D STUDIED SCIENCE AND THE ARTS; I'D TRAVELED, WORKED AS A SEAMAN, BECOME A MAN. WOULD MY OWN FATHER EVEN RECOGNIZE ME?

DEAR OLD FATHER! HOW I'D MISSED HIM! AFTER MOTHER PASSED ON, IT WAS JUST THE TWO OF US.

I'D ALWAYS TAKEN THIS SHORTCUT THROUGH THE GRAVEYARD, A PLEASANTLY MACABRE DETOUR, BUT WHAT I FOUND THERE LEFT ME TREMBLING.

THE HEADSTONES-- DESECRATED!

MY MOTHER'S STONE APPEARED TO HAVE BEEN REPAIRED WHILE OTHERS LAY IN RUINS - AN APPALLING SIGHT!

AVIS

DARLING MOTHER! WHAT A TALE YOU COULD TELL!

THE VERY CHARACTER OF THE TOWN ITSELF HAD CHANGED. STURDY OLD HOUSES HAD BEEN REPLACED BY TAWDRY STRUCTURES OF PLASTER AND LATH.

MY FAMILY HOME STILL STOOD, THOUGH IN GRIEVOUS DISREPAIR. HAD FATHER FALLEN INTO FINANCIAL RUIN?

WHAT A CALAMITY!

DAD'S LETTERS HAD BEEN INFREQUENT - ROTE AND FORMAL, WITH NO MENTION OF HARDSHIP. WAS HE TRYING TO PROTECT ME FROM SOME AWFUL TRUTH?

THERE WAS NO ANSWER, AND ALL THE DOORS AND WINDOWS WERE LATCHED. WOULD THERE BE NO ABATEMENT TO MY MOUNTING DREAD?

OH FATHER! OH DAD! WHERE ARE YOU?

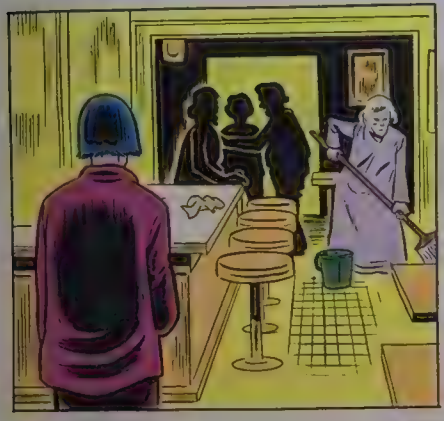
I LEFT MY BAG UNDER THE STAIRS AND MADE MY WAY TOWARD THE TOWN SQUARE. IT WAS THEN I NOTICED A GHASTLY ABSENCE ON THE SKYLINE.

THE OLD CHURCH! IT'S GONE!

IN TOWN, THE STREETS WERE BUSY WITH WORKERS ON THEIR WAY HOME. A FEW OF THE FACES SEEMED FAMILIAR, BUT NO ONE WANTED TO STOP AND TALK.

I MADE MY WAY TO SAM RONDO'S. THEY'D KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO DAD, AFTER MOM DIED, HE ATE THERE EVERY DAY, SOMETIMES MORE THAN ONCE.

THE PLACE WAS ALL BUT EMPTY. I THOUGHT BETTER OF TALKING TO THE ROUGH CHARACTERS IN BACK AS THEY WERE NOT THE SORT WITH WHOM MY FATHER WOULD FRATERNIZE.



THERE WAS NO SIGN OF SAM OR RACHEL. EVEN THEIR PICTURES HAD BEEN TAKEN DOWN. THE OLD MOPWOMAN BARELY LOOKED UP, SO BEATEN DOWN BY LIFE WAS SHE. I KNEW HER FROM SOMEWHERE, BUT STRUGGLED TO MAKE A CONNECTION.

AT LAST IT CAME TO ME! SHE WAS THE HEADMISTRESS AT MY SECONDARY SCHOOL, AN ELEGANT, STATELY WOMAN WHO'D HELD CONSIDERABLE POWER IN OUR TOWN.

I TRIED TO ASK HER ABOUT MY FATHER, BUT WHATEVER RUINOUS DEBASEMENT SHE'D SUFFERED HAD RENDERED HER MUTE.

ELSINORE WAS A LOVELY SEASIDE AMPITHEATER WHERE THEY HELD THE TOWN PAGEANT EVERY SUMMER. HEARING THAT NAME - ELSINORE! - BROUGHT FORTH A CASCADE OF CHERISHED MEMORIES.

I NOTICED THE STREETS WERE STARTING TO CLEAR, A SENSE OF URGENCY IN THE AIR.

HURRY INSIDE! SUNSET IN FIFTEEN MINUTES!

THE DESOLATE STATE OF MY FAMILY HOME PERSISTED, SO I DECIDED TO HEAD OUT INTO THE WOODS, WHERE I SOON FOUND MYSELF ON THE HIDDEN TRAIL TO ELSINORE.

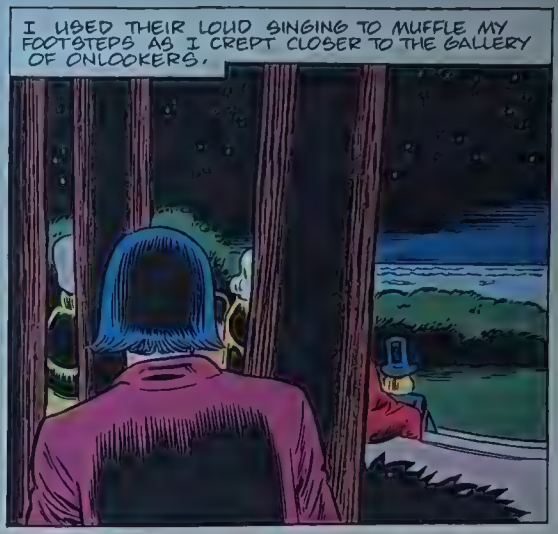
IT WAS JUST AS I REMEMBERED, AN IDYLLIC REFUGE. A SMALL CROWD HAD AMASSED IN THE SEATING AREA.

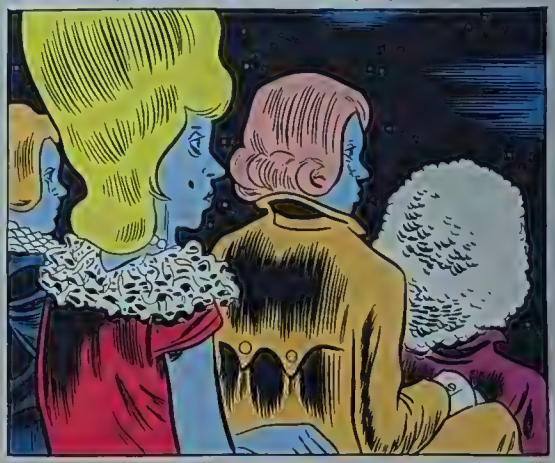
I COULD ONLY MAKE OUT THEIR DISTANT SILHOUETTES IN THE GLOAM. THEY APPEARED TO BE IN COSTUME.

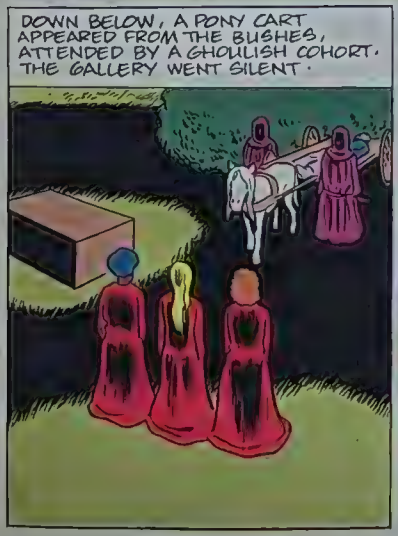
SUDDENLY, THERE WAS A BURST OF APPLAUSE AND THE CROWD ROSE IN UNISON.

THREE YOUNG WOMEN EMERGED FROM THE SEA, SINGING A TONAL, WORDLESS MELODY OF SUCH OTHERWORLDLY BEAUTY IT LEFT ME A-SHIVER WITH PROFOUND EMOTION.

AS THEY DANCED FORWARD INTO THE MOONLIGHT, I RECOGNIZED THEM AS MY FORMER SCHOOLMATES FLORENCE PINE, TANSY TAYLOR, AND THE FOREMENTIONED VERA VAN THORNE.


I USED THEIR LOUD SINGING TO MUFFLE MY FOOTSTEPS AS I CREPT CLOSER TO THE GALLERY OF ONLOOKERS.


THEY WERE STRANGERS TO ME, THEIR SKIN A NAUSEATING BLUISH HUE. STAGE MAKEUP, PERHAPS, BUT TO WHAT PURPOSE?


DOWN BELOW, A PONY CART APPEARED FROM THE BUSHES, ATTENDED BY A GHOULISH COHORT. THE GALLERY WENT SILENT.

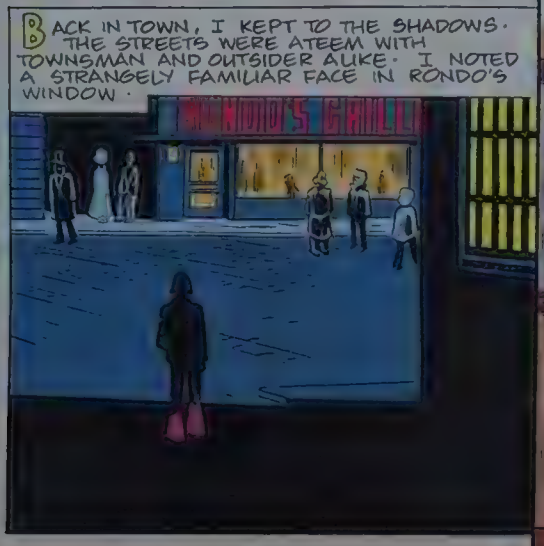
I RECOGNIZED THE OLD MAN AS MR. YOST, A FRIEND OF MY FATHER'S WHO ONCE RAN THE TOWN CANNERY.

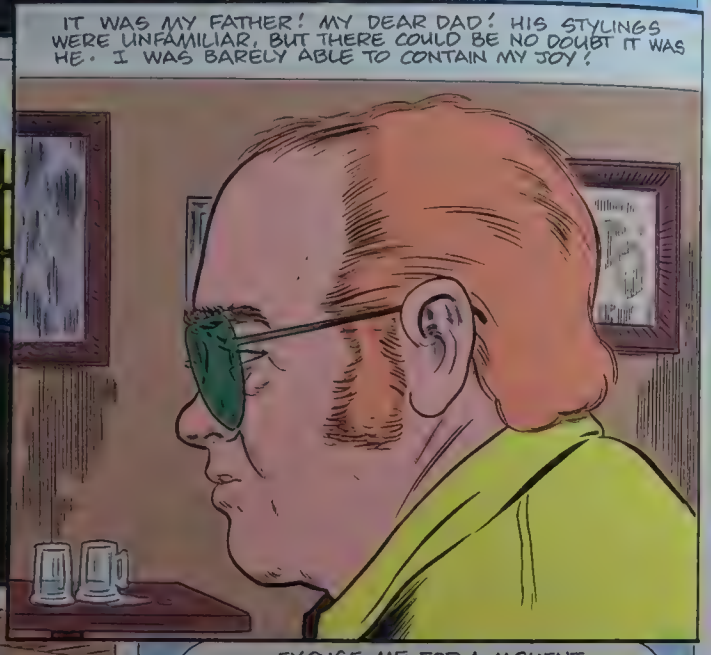
AND IN THAT MOMENT, WHAT HAD SEEMED BUT A DEVILISH MYSTERY BECAME AS A VISIT FROM THE GREAT BEAST OF REVELATION HIMSELF!

I RAN FROM THE SCENE IN TERROR, THROUGH THE WOODS ALONGSIDE THE MAIN ROAD.

THE AUDIENCE MADE THEIR WAY BACK TO TOWN, STROLLING ALONG AS THOUGH THEY'D JUST LEFT A MILDLY-INTERESTING PLAY, ALL LAUGHTER AND GAY CHIT-CHAT.

WHAT GODLESS SCOURGE HAD BESTRICKEN MY BELOVED INGELWOOD?


BACK IN TOWN, I KEPT TO THE SHADOWS. THE STREETS WERE ATEEM WITH TOWNSMAN AND OUTSIDER ALIKE. I NOTED A STRANGELY FAMILIAR FACE IN RONDO'S WINDOW.

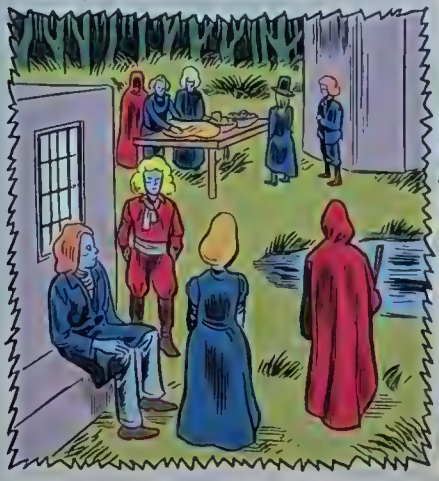

IT WAS MY FATHER! MY DEAR DAD! HIS STYLINGS WERE UNFAMILIAR, BUT THERE COULD BE NO DOUBT IT WAS HE. I WAS BARELY ABLE TO CONTAIN MY JOY!

DAD! OH, DAD! IT'S YOUR WILLIAM, YOUR BILLY! OH DAD, I'M SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU!

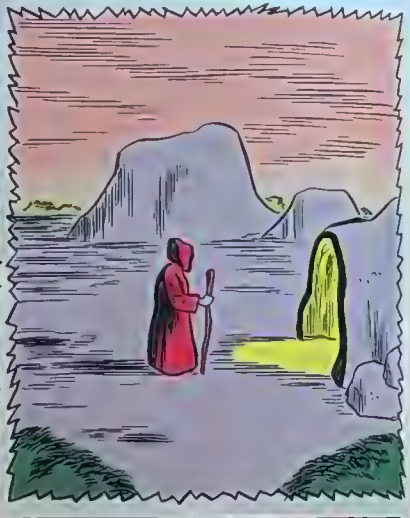
EXCUSE ME FOR A MOMENT, WILLIAM. I'LL BE RIGHT BACK. IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU, SON.

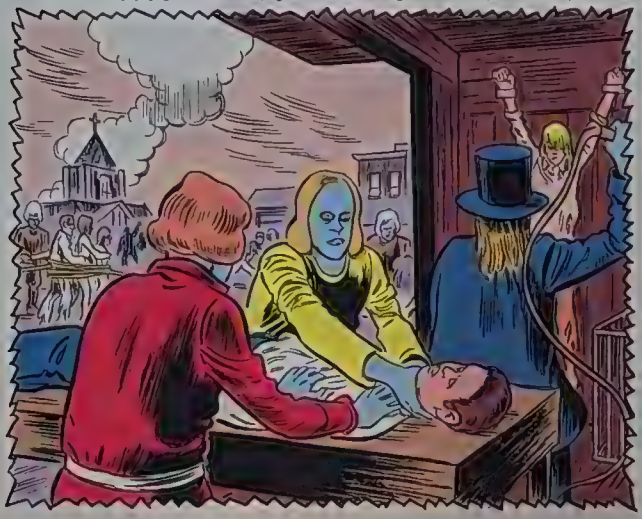
AND WITH THAT, HE SLIPPED OFF INTO THE CROWD. EVERYTHING WOULD BE OKAY NOW. HE'D CALM THE ROILING WATERS WHICH RAGED UPON MY CONSCIENCE.
BUT WHEN I PEERED BACK THROUGH THE CROWD, I FELT A SUDDEN CHILL. WAS DAD ON FRIENDLY TERMS WITH THE STRANGE VISITORS?
I THEN FELT A SECOND CHILL AT THE SIGHT OF MRS. VAN THORNE. HAD SHE KNOWN OF HER DAUGHTER'S COMPLICITY IN THE GRUESOME THEATRICS I'D WITNESSED?
SHE EDGED CLOSER, WHELMING MY PSYCHE WITH DREAD, THAT I MIGHT HEAR HER GRAVE ADMONITIONS.
YOU MUST LEAVE IMMEDIATELY, WILLIAM. YOU'RE IN GRAVE PERIL. RUN NOW TOWARD THE CAVES ALONG THE UPLAND TRAIL.
SHE SPOKE WITH SUCH DIRE URGENCY, I DIDN'T DARE HESITATE! I'D FIND DAD LATER AT THE HOUSE.
I KNEW THE PATH WELL, A LIGHTLY-TROD SHORTCUT TO THE OLD COPPER MINE. I COULD SENSE I WAS BEING FOLLOWED, DESPITE MY STEALTH, AND I BROKE INTO A BRISK TROT.
HELLO, WILLIAM!
=GASP=

VERA AND HER COMPATRIOTS – SYBILS THREE! – CONVERGED AND BEGAN A DISHARMONIC DIRGE THAT TOLD A TERRIBLE HISTORY, THAT OF THE BLUE INVASION.


THEY SANG OF AN INBRED ARISTOCRATIC SECT, EXILED CENTURIES HENCE TO THE HIDDEN SWAMPLANDS FOR THEIR UNHOLY WORSHIP OF AN IMMORTAL ENTITY KNOWN BY A NAME NO CHRISTIAN TONGUE COULD PRONOUNCE.

LOST UNDER MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES, GENERATIONS OF BLUE WANDERERS HAVE ROAMED IN SEARCH OF WHAT OUTSIDERS CALL "THE BLEEDING THING," THEIR VANISHED DEUS.


O MISFORTUNE! O SORROW! THE GHASTLY DAEMON HAD MIGRATED THROUGH UNCHARTED TUNNELS TO A CAVERN ABUTTING OUR LUCKLESS HAMLET.

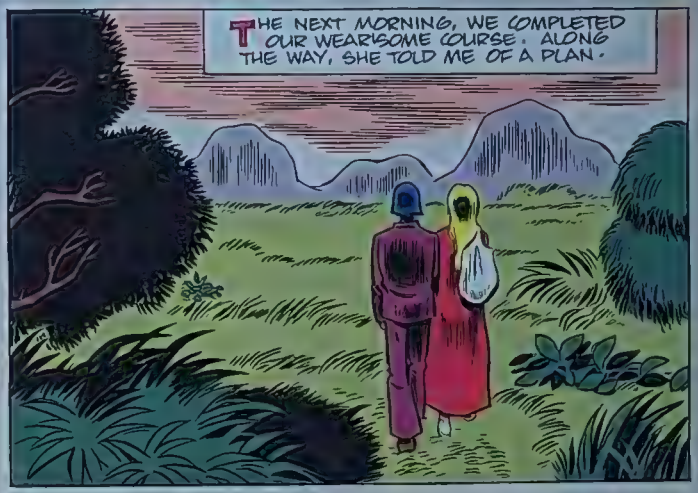

THENCE BEGAN A GREAT CORRUPTION, A REIGN OF TERROR UNDER WHICH ALL GOOD TOWNSFOLK WERE EITHER SLAUGHTERED OR DEBASED, MADE SERVANT TO THAT FALSEST OF IDOLS. AND SO IT IS TO THIS DAY!

WE ARE THE DAUGHTERS OF THE HOLLOW CYPRESS, REGISTERS OF THE BLUE SCOURGE!
WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU.

AND WITH THAT, VERA AND I BEGAN A JOURNEY APART FROM HER SISTREN, A TREACHEROUS VOYAGE DEEP INTO THE WOODS TOWARD THE CAVELANDS.

AFTER TOILSOME HOURS, WE STOPPED FOR THE NIGHT. SHE TOLD OF HER VARIED HUMILIATIONS SINCE THE SIEGE, HER FEIGNED COMPLICITY. SHE HONORED ME AS A NOBLE TOWNSMAN, PURE OF HEART.
MAY YOUR STRENGTH AND ENDURANCE BE AS THAT OF A THOUSAND OAKS.

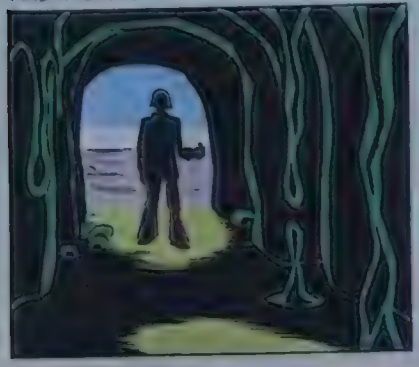
NEVER BEFORE HAVE I BEEN SO MOVED BY PASSION FOR BOTH CAUSE AND CRUSADER!

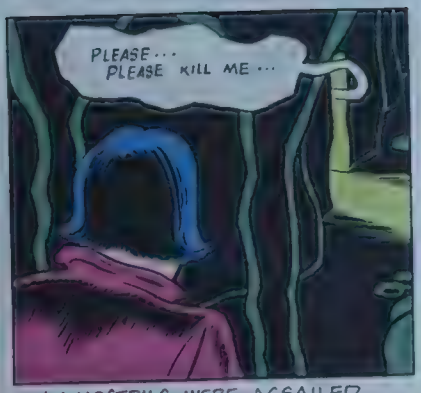

THE NEXT MORNING, WE COMPLETED OUR WEARISOME COURSE. ALONG THE WAY, SHE TOLD ME OF A PLAN.

SHE WOULD LURE THE MORNING GUARD FROM HIS DUTY, WHILE THE OTHER DAUGHTERS WERE TO THWART THE ARRIVAL OF HIS REPLACEMENT. WITH THIS MOMENTARY FREEDOM, I WAS TO MAKE MY WAY INTO THE FOREBODING BREACH.

I WAS GIVEN BUT TWO TOOLS - A JAR OF NAPTHA AND A PAIR OF SAFETY MATCHES - WITH NO FURTHER INSTRUCTION EXCEPTING AN ADMONITION TO COURAGE AND DUTY.

I WATCHED UNTIL THEY WERE OUT OF VIEW AND RAN THEN TO THE DREADFUL OPENING. ONCE INSIDE, I WAS GUIDED BY A FIENDISH AURA, AND THE SOUND OF A PLAINTIVE MOAN.



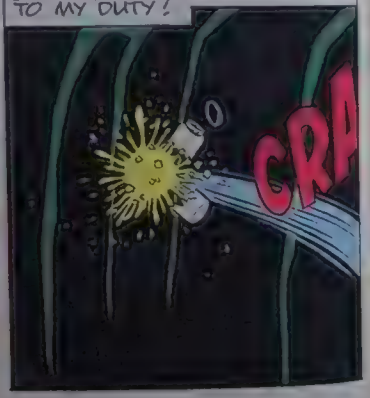


MY NOSTRILS WERE ASSAILED BY A TERRIBLE STENCH, BUT I CONTINUED ON, EVER CLOSER TO THE LIGHT.

I STOOD IMMOBILE IN HORROR, RECOGNIZING THE CORPOREAL DETRITUS OF FALLEN TOWNSMEN AMID THE PUTRESCENT CHAOS.

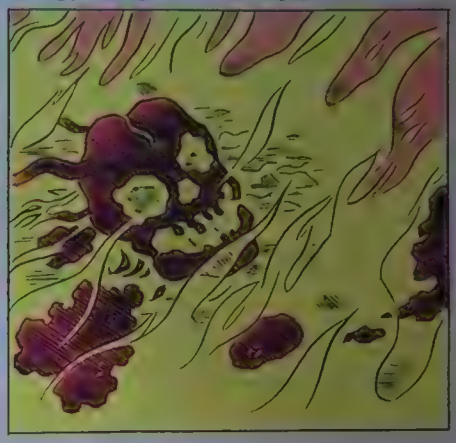
THE MONSTER'S ENTREATIES SERVED ONLY TO CONFOUND MY PSYCHE. HOW COULD SUCH A MALEVOLENCE DESIRE THE SAME AS I, ONE PURIFIED IN THE BLOOD OF CHRIST?

BUT I HADN'T THE LUXURY OF SUCH HEADY DEBATES AND GAVE OVER WITH MIGHTY VEHEMENCE TO MY DUTY!



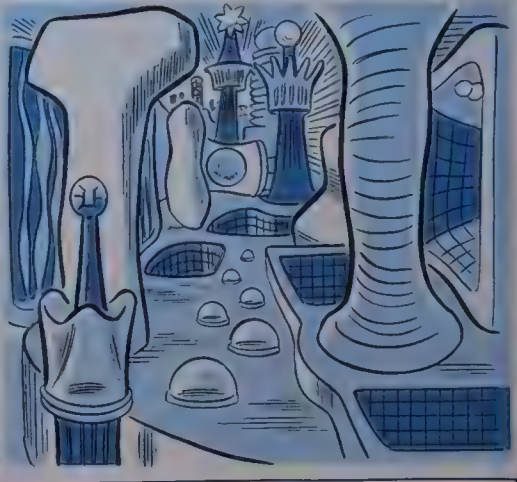
THE CREATURE LAUGHED IN JOYFUL RELIEF AS HE BURNED. IT WAS IN THAT MOMENT I CAME TO QUESTION MY COMPLICITY IN THIS GHASTLY SPECTACLE.

THE TASK HAD BEEN SIMPLE. SURELY ANOTHER SOUL COULD HAVE ACTED NO LESS BRAVELY - AND FAR MORE EXPEDITIOUSLY - THAN I?



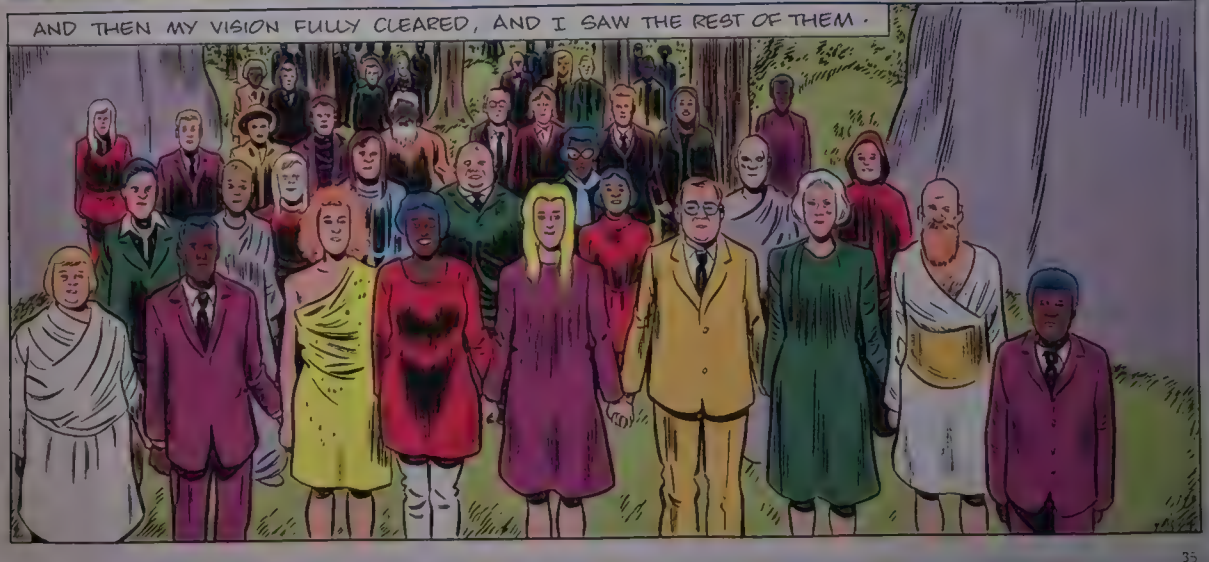
SULPHUR FILLED MY LUNGS AND I TURNED TO ESCAPE, BUT FOUND MYSELF QUICKLY OVERCOME AS I PLODDED BLIND THROUGH THE LABYRINTH.

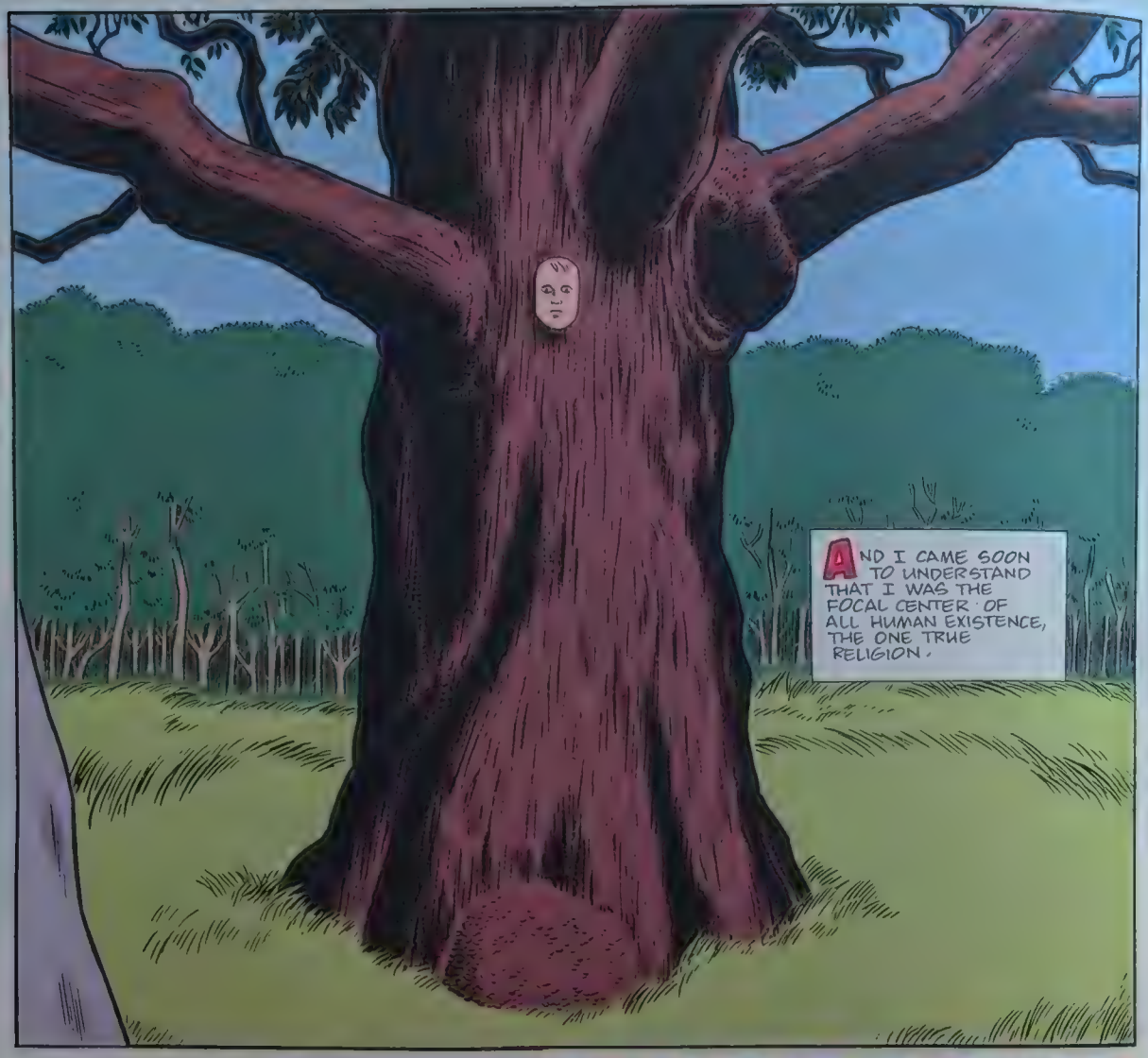
I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I LAY UNCONSCIOUS. MONTHS, PERHAPS? I'D HAD VIVID DREAMS OF THE IMMORTALS AND THEIR SECRET HISTORY, FROM ADAM'S EDEN ONWARD.



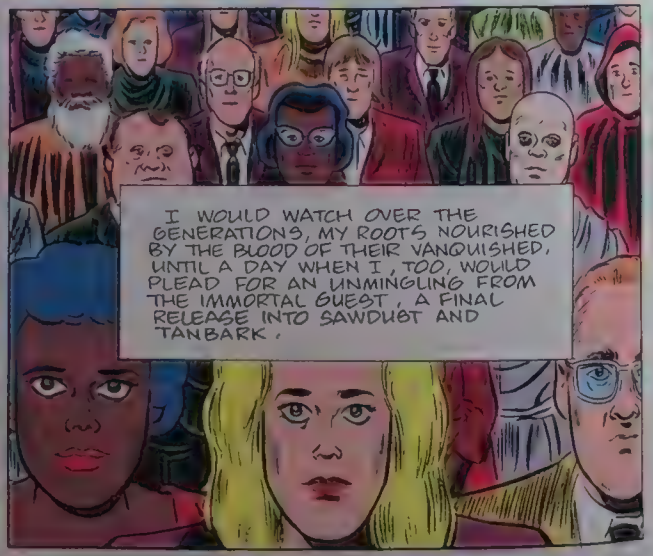
THE FIRST SIGHT UPON WAKING WAS VERA'S FACE. I WAS FREE OF PAIN, FLOATING ABOVE HER LIKE AN ANGEL.

AND THEN MY VISION FULLY CLEARED, AND I SAW THE REST OF THEM.

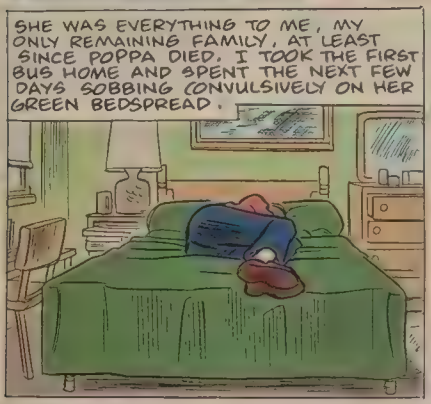


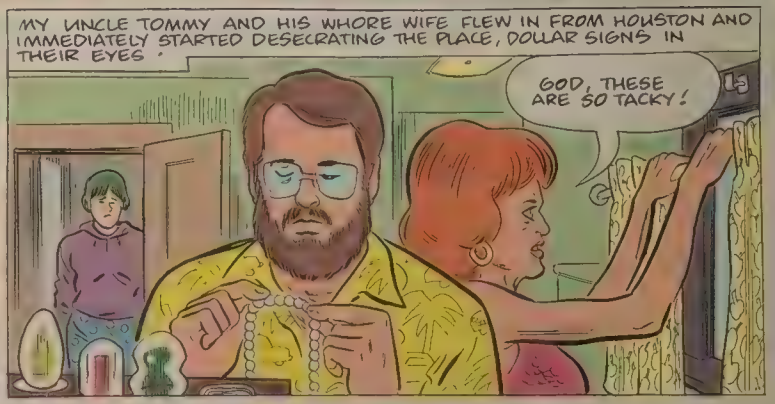


THE ONCE-BEDEVILLED TOWNSFOLK OF INGELWOOD - AND THEIR HEIRS AFTER THEM - WERE NOW TO LIVE ENRICHED BY THE BENEVOLENCE OF MY SACRIFICE.

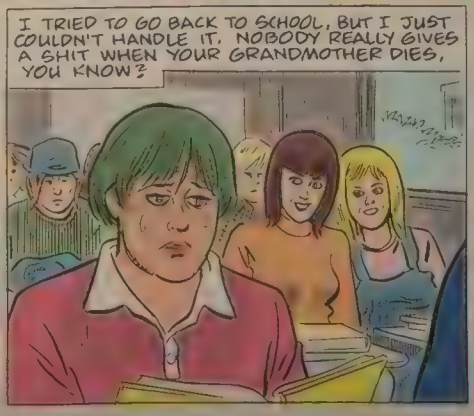

I WOULD WATCH OVER THE GENERATIONS, MY ROOTS NOURISHED BY THE BLOOD OF THEIR VANQUISHED, UNTIL A DAY WHEN I, TOO, WOULD PLEAD FOR AN UNMINGLING FROM THE IMMORTAL GUEST, A FINAL RELEASE INTO SAWDUST AND TANBARK.

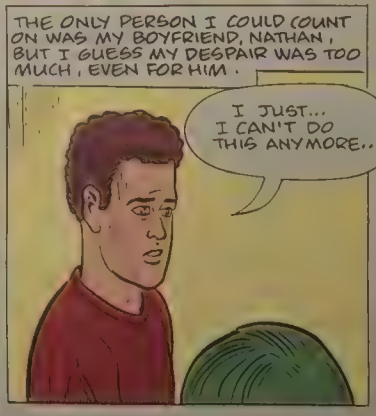
DEMONICA
IT ALL BEGAN WHEN MY BELOVED GRANDMOTHER DIED WHILE I WAS AWAY AT COLLEGE, JUST A WEEK INTO MY JUNIOR YEAR.


SHE WAS EVERYTHING TO ME, MY ONLY REMAINING FAMILY, AT LEAST SINCE POPPA DIED. I TOOK THE FIRST BUS HOME AND SPENT THE NEXT FEW DAYS SOBBING CONVULSIVELY ON HER GREEN BEDSPREAD.

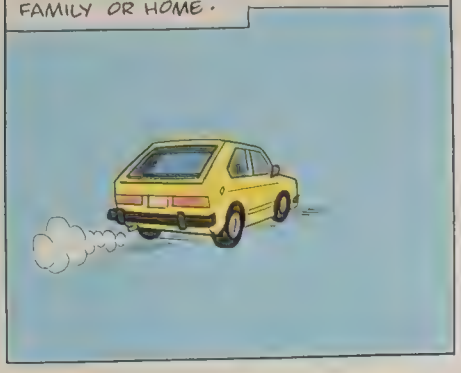

MY UNCLE TOMMY AND HIS WHORE WIFE FLEW IN FROM HOUSTON AND IMMEDIATELY STARTED DESECRATING THE PLACE, DOLLAR SIGNS IN THEIR EYES.
GOD, THESE ARE SO TACKY!

THEY HADN'T EVEN VISITED HER IN YEARS. NEEDLESS TO SAY, I TOTALLY FREAKED THE FUCK OUT.
HEY, CHILL! SHE WAS MY MOM, OKAY?!

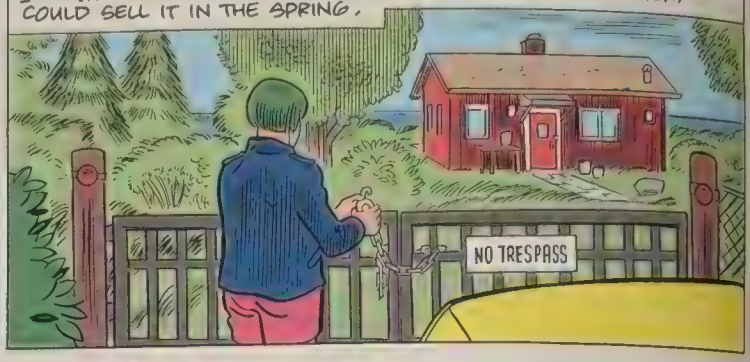

I TRIED TO GO BACK TO SCHOOL, BUT I JUST COULDN'T HANDLE IT. NOBODY REALLY GIVES A SHIT WHEN YOUR GRANDMOTHER DIES, YOU KNOW?


THE ONLY PERSON I COULD COUNT ON WAS MY BOYFRIEND, NATHAN, BUT I GUESS MY DESPAIR WAS TOO MUCH, EVEN FOR HIM.
I JUST... I CAN'T DO THIS ANYMORE...

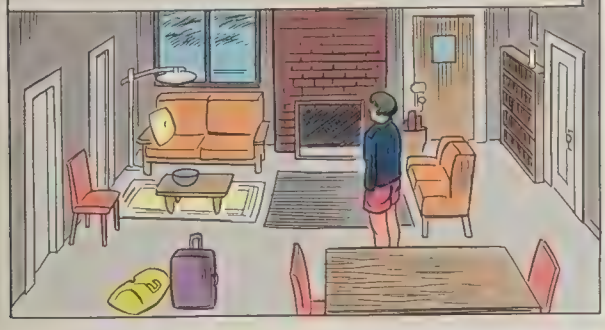
SO THERE I WAS, A TROUBLED YOUNG WOMAN; LOST AND UNLOVED, WITHOUT FAMILY OR HOME.



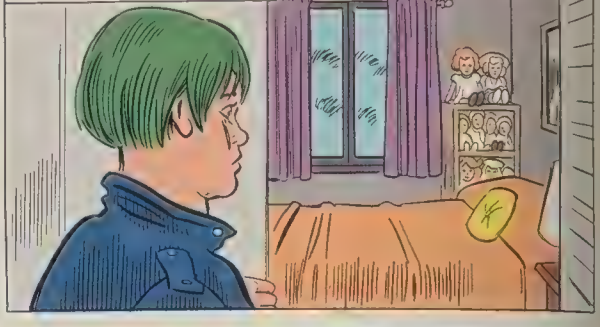
MY GRANDPARENTS HAD A LITTLE COTTAGE ON THE LAKE WHERE I SPENT ALL MY (POST-PENNY) CHILDHOOD SUMMERS. IT WAS DECIDED I WOULD GO THERE AND CLEAR THE PLACE OUT SO TOMMY COULD SELL IT IN THE SPRING.



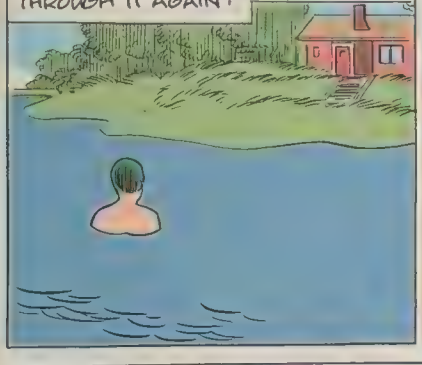
I WAS HAPPY FOR THE CHANCE TO BE ALONE, TO FEEL CONNECTED TO MOMMA AND POPPA WHILE I DEALT WITH THE TRAUMA, AND TO BE AWAY FROM TOMMY AND THAT WIFE-THING. A TRIPLE WIN.



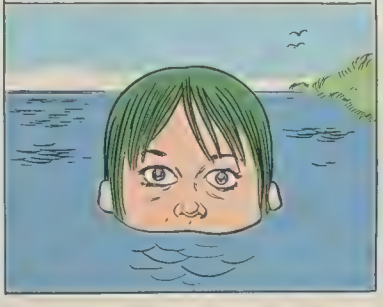
THIS WAS, IT OCCURED TO ME, MY FOURTH ABANDONMENT: FIRST MY DAD, THEN PENNY, POPPA - WHO DIED UP HERE WHILE I WAS AT A.P. ENGLISH CAMP - AND NOW MY DARLING M.



IN A WAY, IT WAS A HUGE RELIEF TO KNOW I'D NEVER HAVE TO GO THROUGH IT AGAIN.

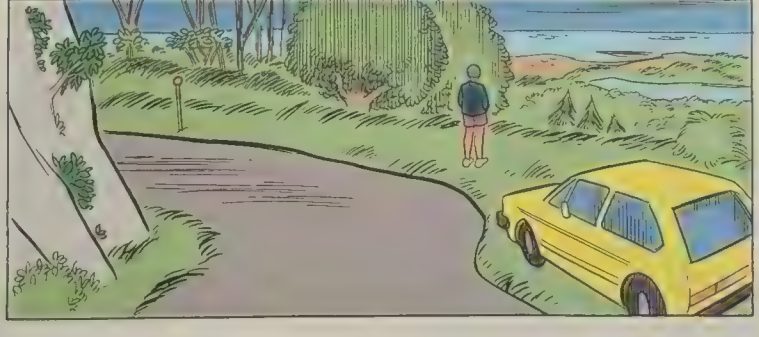


THE SEPTEMBER WATER WAS FREEZING. ALL THE VACATIONERS WERE GONE AND THE LOCALS DIDN'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THE BEACH. IT WAS JUST ME.



I DECIDED TO DRIVE INTO TOWN TO STOCK UP ON SUPPLIES BEFORE IT GOT TOO LATE.

I TOOK THE LONG WAY AND WOUND UP ON MT. EVERLAST. M AND P LIKED TO COME UP HERE AND JUST STARE OUT AT THE LANDSCAPE. IT USED TO DRIVE ME NUTS, BUT NOW I GET IT. THIS IS PRETTY MUCH THE SAME VIEW YOU WOULD HAVE SEEN 1000 YEARS AGO.

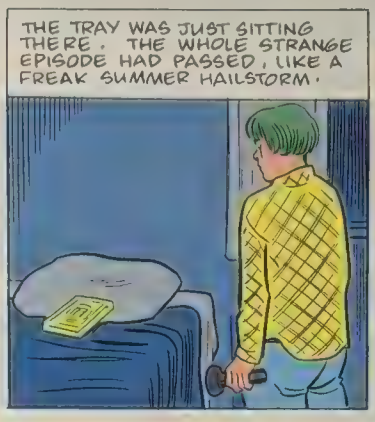


I HAD BEEN TO THE LITTLE STORE A MILLION TIMES, BUT THEY ACTED LIKE THEY DIDN'T RECOGNIZE ME.

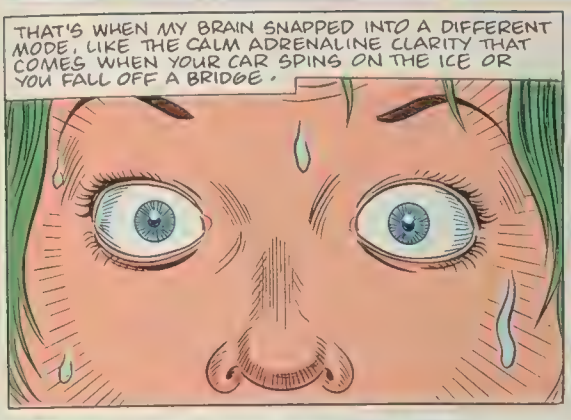
THAT'S HOW IT IS WITH THE LOCALS. ONCE THE SUMMER'S OVER THEY DON'T HAVE TO BE NICE ANYMORE.
$6.56.
FOR DINNER, I COOKED HOT DOGS OVER AN OPEN FIRE, LIKE ALWAYS.
WHOA, LOOK AT THAT HAIR!
IT WAS MACK, THE BRAT FROM NEXT DOOR, ALL GROWN UP.
WE SEEN THE SMOKE. MY MA THOUGHT SOME SCUMBAGS SET THE PLACE ON FIRE.
WE'RE JUST UP FOR THE WEEK - LAST OF THE DEER HUNTIN'. I'LL BRING YOU OVER SOME VENISON MEATBALLS!
I'M A VEGETARIAN.
EXCEPT FOR HOT DOGS.
SO, I'M IN MOURNING AND I REALLY NEED TO BE ALONE WHILE I'M HERE, OKAY? SAY HI TO YOUR MOM FOR ME.
THAT NIGHT, I PLAYED KLONDIKE AND LISTENED TO THE RADIO, STILL ON M'S STATION. I WAS PLANNING TO GO TO BED EARLY, BUT MY SLEEP SCHEDULE WAS ALL WEIRD FROM CRYING.
♫ LIFE AIN'T NOTHIN' BUT A FUNNY FUNNY RIDDLE...
I DECIDED TO CHECK OUT POPPA'S ROOM. IT WAS BASICALLY UNTOUCHED SINCE HE DIED. POOR MOMMA JUST CLOSED THE DOOR AND WE NEVER WENT BACK IN.
ON THE FLOOR WAS A BRAND NEW WALKMAN WE BOUGHT HIM, ALONG WITH A STACK OF TAPES. HE NEVER EVEN TOOK IT OUT OF THE BOX, IT LOOKS LIKE.
HE WAS ALWAYS TALKING ABOUT THE BEAUTIFUL MUSIC OF HIS YOUTH, SO IT SEEMED LIKE THE PERFECT PRESENT. I EVEN INCLUDED A FEW OF MY OWN FAVORITES, HOPING TO FORGE SOME IMPLAUSIBLE BOND.
THE CURE
Stardust
LUCKILY, HE HAD ZERO INTEREST, THANK GOD!
CLICK CLICK CLICK
(NO BATTERIES, DUH)
THE GAS HAD BEEN SHUT OFF, SO I MADE A FIRE AND SLEPT ON THE FLOOR. IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT MACK WAS POSSIBLY (PROBABLY?) OUT THERE MASTURBATING. TOMORROW I'D PUT UP SOME CURTAINS.

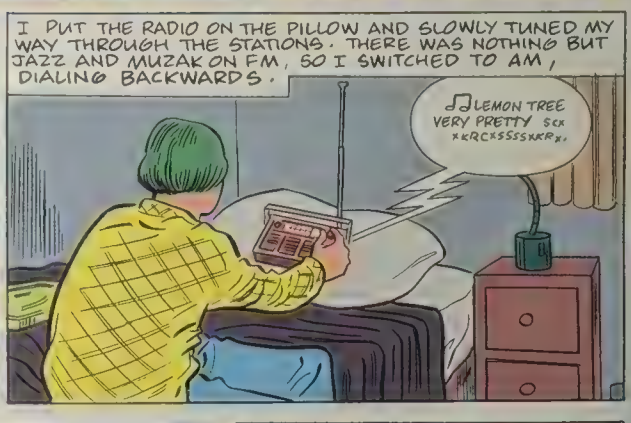
IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, I WAS AWAKENED BY A WEIRD BUZZING NOISE. I TRIED TO TUNE IT OUT, BUT IT WAS JARRING AND ERRATIC, TOTALLY MADDENING.
BZZzT
I FIGURED IT WAS A BUG, LIKE A HUGE MOTH OR SOMETHING. MAYBE A MOUSE.
BZZ
WHEN I WAS A KID I WAS TERRIFIED OF INSECTS AND STUFF, BUT NOW I'M A GROWN WOMAN, SO I CAN DEAL WITH WHATEVER. IT LOOKED LIKE THERE WAS SOMETHING TRAPPED BENEATH THE PLASTIC WALKMAN TRAY.
BZZZ.Z
OR NOT.
BZZZZ
SOMEHOW, THE TRAY ITSELF WAS BUZZING!
WHAT THE HELL?
BZZZZZ
THE VIBRATION SEEMED TO CHANGE DEPENDING ON WHERE I HELD IT, LIKE IT WAS PICKING UP SIGNALS. NOW, I'LL ADMIT I DON'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT HOW TV RECEPTION WORKS, OR WHATEVER, BUT THIS DIDN'T SEEM TO MAKE MUCH SENSE.
THE CLOSER I MOVED IT TO THE BED, THE LOUDER AND MORE INTENSE IT GOT.
BADD
MOMCH
I JUST STOOD THERE, FROZEN, LIKE "WHAT IN THE FUCK IS GOING ON!?"
MACK?!
TOMMY!?
SOMEBODY HAD TO BE SCREWING WITH ME, RIGHT? I WALKED AROUND THE HOUSE LIKE TWENTY TIMES, DOWN THE ROAD, THE BEACH, THE WOODS. NOTHING.
I KNOW YOU'RE THERE!

PART OF ME WANTED TO JUST GET IN THE CAR AND DRIVE AWAY, BUT, LIKE I SAID, I WAS A GROWN WOMAN, SO I DECIDED TO SUCK IT UP AND GO BACK INSIDE.

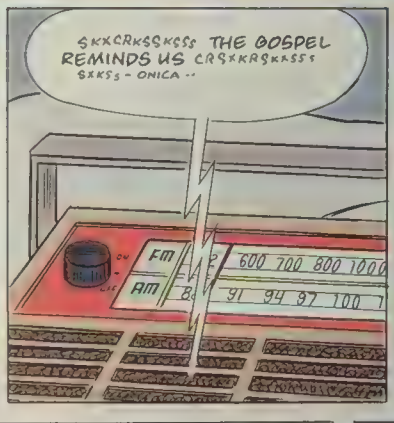

THE TRAY WAS JUST SITTING THERE. THE WHOLE STRANGE EPISODE HAD PASSED, LIKE A FREAK SUMMER HAILSTORM.

IT WAS JUST ONE OF TH
AAAA


THAT'S WHEN MY BRAIN SNAPPED INTO A DIFFERENT MODE, LIKE THE CALM ADRENALINE CLARITY THAT COMES WHEN YOUR CAR SPINS ON THE ICE OR YOU FALL OFF A BRIDGE.

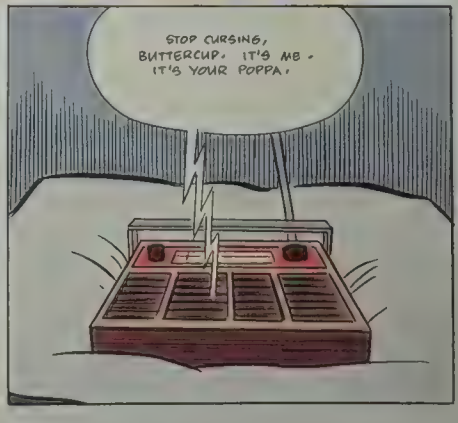

I PUT THE RADIO ON THE PILLOW AND SLOWLY TUNED MY WAY THROUGH THE STATIONS. THERE WAS NOTHING BUT JAZZ AND MUZAK ON FM, SO I SWITCHED TO AM, DIALING BACKWARDS.
LEMON TREE VERY PRETTY

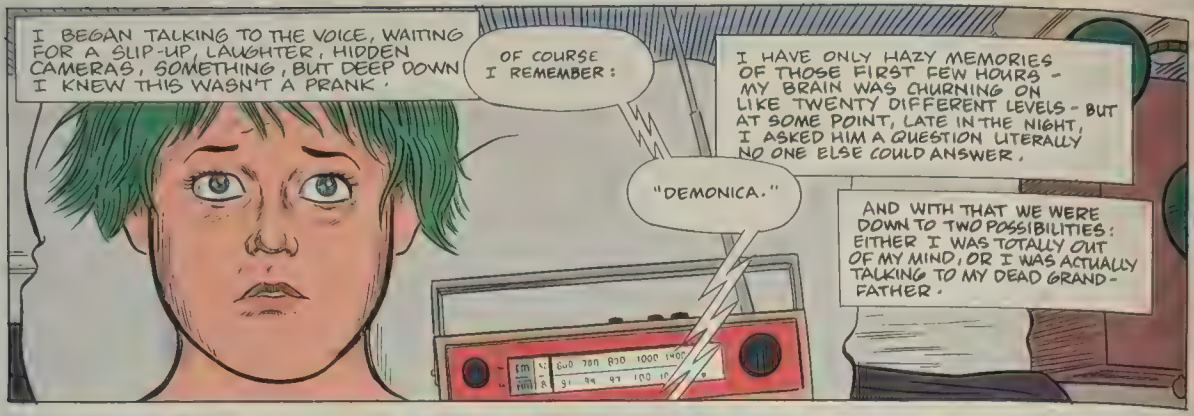
STOP BY MOHAWK REXALL FOR YOUR EV-

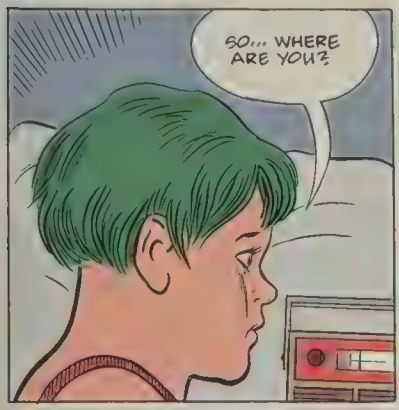

THE GOSPEL REMINDS US
FM
AM
600 700 800 1000
91 94 97 100

MONICA ?

THAT'S WHEN I ACTUALLY STARTED TO GET PISSED OFF. WHO THE HELL WOULD DO THIS TO A BROKEN, GRIEVING NEAR-ORPHAN?
WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?!
MONICA ...
SHUT THE FUCK U


STOP CURSING, BUTTERCUP. IT'S ME - IT'S YOUR POPPA.

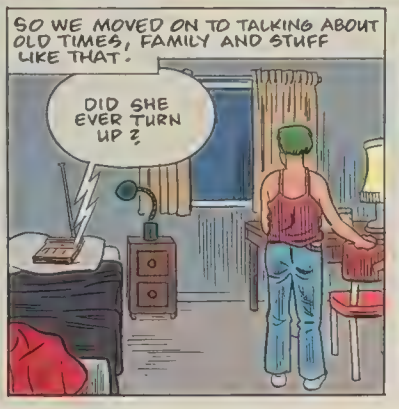

I BEGAN TALKING TO THE VOICE, WAITING FOR A SLIP-UP, LAUGHTER, HIDDEN CAMERAS, SOMETHING, BUT DEEP DOWN I KNEW THIS WASN'T A PRANK.
OF COURSE I REMEMBER:
"DEMONICA."
I HAVE ONLY HAZY MEMORIES OF THOSE FIRST FEW HOURS - MY BRAIN WAS CHURNING ON LIKE TWENTY DIFFERENT LEVELS - BUT AT SOME POINT, LATE IN THE NIGHT, I ASKED HIM A QUESTION LITERALLY NO ONE ELSE COULD ANSWER.
AND WITH THAT WE WERE DOWN TO TWO POSSIBILITIES: EITHER I WAS TOTALLY OUT OF MY MIND, OR I WAS ACTUALLY TALKING TO MY DEAD GRANDFATHER.


SO... WHERE ARE YOU?

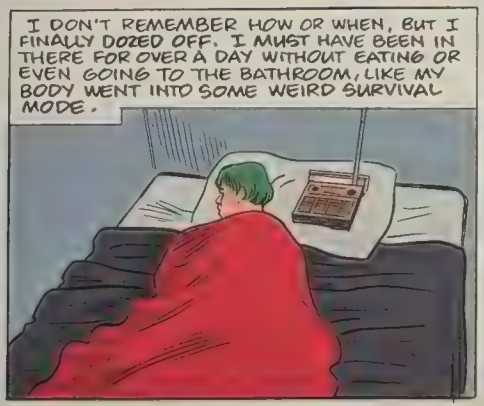
ME? I'M DEAD.
STILL DEAD.

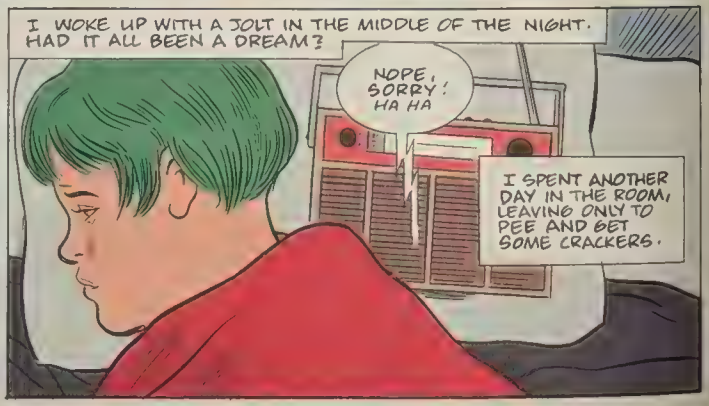
ARE THERE OTHER PEOPLE THERE I COULD TALK TO?
DEAD PEOPLE?
NO, THEY LEFT ME BEHIND. I'M ALL ALONE.

HE DIDN'T HAVE ANY BETTER EXPLANATION FOR WHAT WAS GOING ON THAN I DID.
THERE ARE NO WORDS TO DESCRIBE IT IN ANY WAY, AND THAT'S ALL I'M GOING TO SAY ON THE SUBJECT.


SO WE MOVED ON TO TALKING ABOUT OLD TIMES, FAMILY AND STUFF LIKE THAT.
DID SHE EVER TURN UP?

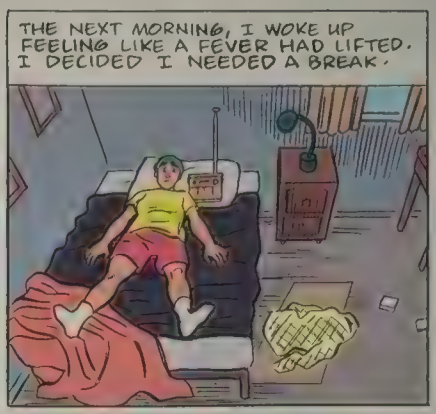
IT ALL FELT SO NORMAL, IN A WAY.
IF THERE IS A GOD, I SURE AS HELL HAVEN'T SEEN HIM.


I DON'T REMEMBER HOW OR WHEN, BUT I FINALLY DOZED OFF. I MUST HAVE BEEN IN THERE FOR OVER A DAY WITHOUT EATING OR EVEN GOING TO THE BATHROOM, LIKE MY BODY WENT INTO SOME WEIRD SURVIVAL MODE.

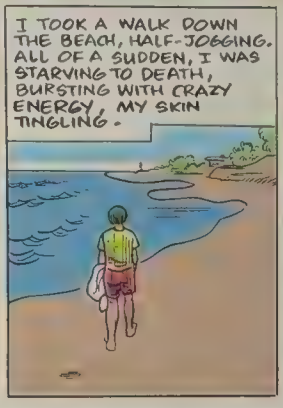

I WOKE UP WITH A JOLT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. HAD IT ALL BEEN A DREAM?
NOPE, SORRY! HA HA
I SPENT ANOTHER DAY IN THE ROOM, LEAVING ONLY TO PEE AND GET SOME CRACKERS.

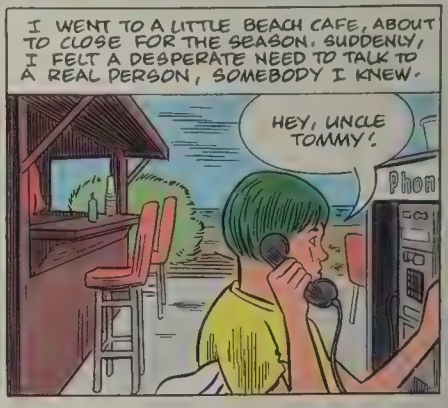
PART OF ME WAS SCARED THAT IF I CHANGED ANYTHING AT ALL I'D LOSE THE SIGNAL, BUT, AT HIS URGING, I FINALLY DECIDED TO SEE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I TOOK THE RADIO OUT OF THE ROOM.
...

I TRIED WALKING AROUND THE HOUSE AND THEN OUT IN THE YARD. NOTHING. IT ONLY WORKED THERE IN THE ROOM, ON THE PILLOW.

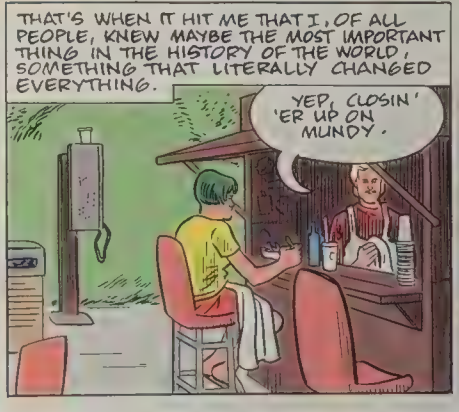

THE NEXT MORNING, I WOKE UP FEELING LIKE A FEVER HAD LIFTED. I DECIDED I NEEDED A BREAK.

WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON!?

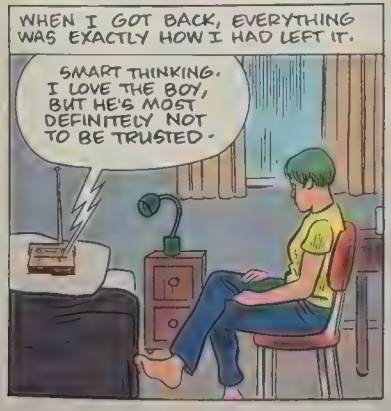

I TOOK A WALK DOWN THE BEACH, HALF-JOGGING. ALL OF A SUDDEN, I WAS STARVING TO DEATH, BURSTING WITH CRAZY ENERGY, MY SKIN TINGLING.

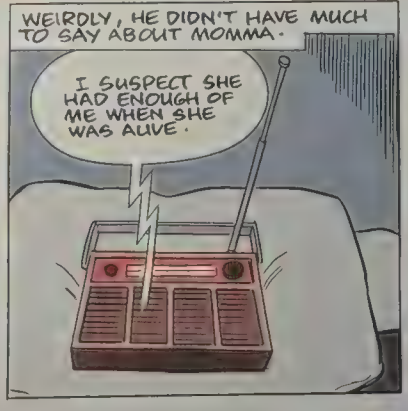

I WENT TO A LITTLE BEACH CAFE, ABOUT TO CLOSE FOR THE SEASON. SUDDENLY, I FELT A DESPERATE NEED TO TALK TO A REAL PERSON, SOMEBODY I KNEW.
HEY, UNCLE TOMMY!
Phon

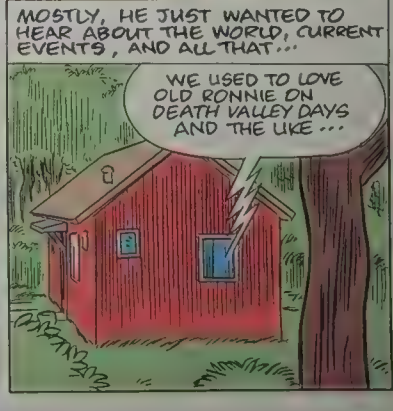
THE SECOND I HEARD HIS VOICE, I KNEW I WOULD NEVER TELL MY SECRET. NOT TO ANYBODY, EVER.
OH, FINE. ... NO, I JUST -


THAT'S WHEN IT HIT ME THAT I, OF ALL PEOPLE, KNEW MAYBE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD, SOMETHING THAT LITERALLY CHANGED EVERYTHING.
YEP, CLOSIN' 'ER UP ON MUNDY.

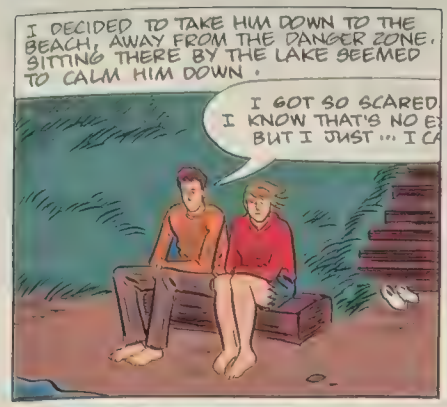
I'VE NEVER FELT MORE ALONE THAN RIGHT THEN, COMPLETELY SEPARATE FROM THE REST OF HUMANITY.
..TAKIN' SOME ME-TIME BEFORE SNOWMOBILIN' STARTS UP...


WHEN I GOT BACK, EVERYTHING WAS EXACTLY HOW I HAD LEFT IT.
SMART THINKING. I LOVE THE BOY, BUT HE'S MOST DEFINITELY NOT TO BE TRUSTED.


WEIRDLY, HE DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TO SAY ABOUT MOMMA.
I SUSPECT SHE HAD ENOUGH OF ME WHEN SHE WAS ALIVE.

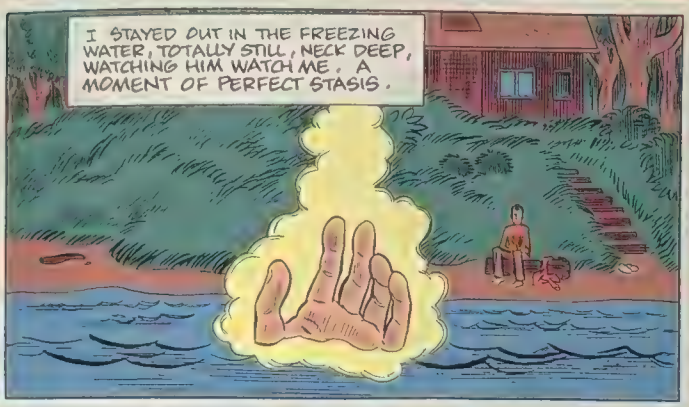

MOSTLY, HE JUST WANTED TO HEAR ABOUT THE WORLD, CURRENT EVENTS, AND ALL THAT...
WE USED TO LOVE OLD RONNIE ON DEATH VALLEY DAYS AND THE LIKE...

THE WEEKS DRIFTED BY, JUST THE TWO OF US IN THAT ROOM. LONG HOURS WOULD PASS WITHOUT A WORD, JUST WHISTLING ALONG TO OLD SONGS OR AN OCCASIONAL SIGH.
"THERE IS ONE THING THAT IS MOST IMPORTANT IN ALL THE MYSTERIES OF TONIGHT, AND THAT IS HOW THE UGLY LITTLE AUBURN-HAIRED RED-EYED MAN, WITH HIS TORN EAR SHARP DOG-POINTED
I REMEMBER THIS ONE.
EVERY EVENING, I WOULD READ ALOUD FROM ONE OF HIS OLD MYSTERY NOVELS, A FAVORITE AMONG OUR MANY HAPPY ROUTINES.
THAT IS POINT
KNOCK KNOCK
I SHUT OFF THE RADIO AND INSTINCTIVELY GRABBED MY HATCHET, READY FOR THE WORST.
HEY, YOU GOT A PHONE CALL.
I WAS SHAKING, TOTALLY RATTLED BY THE SUDDEN INTRUSION, LIKE I'D BEEN AWAKENED FROM A TWO-MONTH DREAM.
SOME GUY SAYS HE'S YOUR BOYFRIEND.
MACK POINTED TO THE PHONE. HIS FOLKS JUST SAT THERE, GRINNING LIKE IDIOTS; NOT EVEN A NOD. CLEARLY, CRAZY MONICA WAS THE SOURCE OF MUCH MIRTH AND INTRIGUE AT THE VAN AADEN HOUSE.
HELLO?
IT WAS NATHAN, SOBBING HYSTERICALLY, BEGGING ME TO SEE HIM. I TOLD HIM I COULDN'T POSSIBLY, NOT RIGHT THEN, BUT HE WAS ALREADY IN TOWN, OUTSIDE BAUER'S STORE. HE'D BE THERE IN TEN MINUTES!
I'LL GET RID OF HIM AS QUICK AS I CAN. DON'T WORRY, OKAY?
IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D LOOKED IN THE MIRROR IN WEEKS. I WAS SHOCKED TO SEE MYSELF, ALL FLESH AND HAIR.
I LOCKED THE DOOR AND WAITED OUT FRONT. THERE WAS NO WAY I WAS LETTING HIM INSIDE, NOT IN HIS CONDITION.
I'M SO SORRY... I-I'M SUCH A FUCKING ASSHOLE...

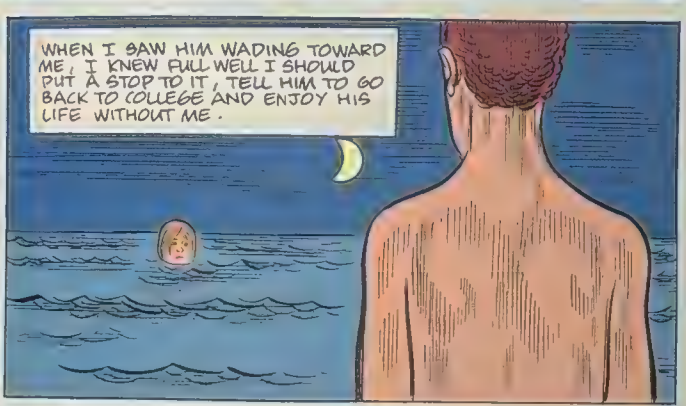

I DECIDED TO TAKE HIM DOWN TO THE BEACH, AWAY FROM THE DANGER ZONE. SITTING THERE BY THE LAKE SEEMED TO CALM HIM DOWN.
I GOT SO SCARED I KNOW THAT'S NO E BUT I JUST ... I CA

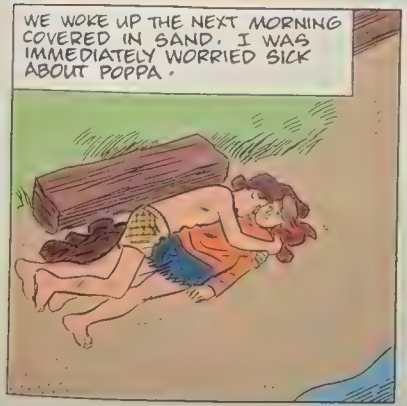
I WAS COMPLETELY UNPREPARED FOR HOW IT MADE ME FEEL, TO BE SO CLOSE TO AN ACTUAL PHYSICAL HUMAN BODY. TOTALLY OVERWHELMING.

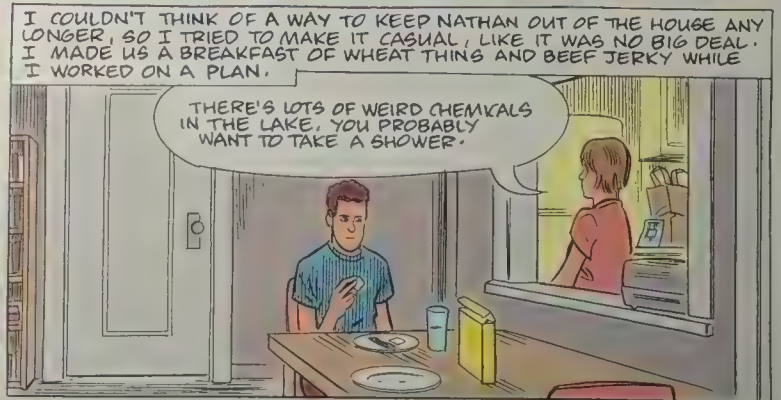
IT GOT SO INTENSE I COULDN'T TAKE IT - MY SKIN WAS BURNING, LIKE I WAS COVERED IN FIRE ANTS.


I STAYED OUT IN THE FREEZING WATER, TOTALLY STILL, NECK DEEP, WATCHING HIM WATCH ME. A MOMENT OF PERFECT STASIS.

BUT THE FACT IS, I'VE NEVER WANTED ANYTHING MORE. PURE ELEMENTAL DESIRE, LIKE NOTHING I'VE EVER FELT, BEFORE OR SINCE.

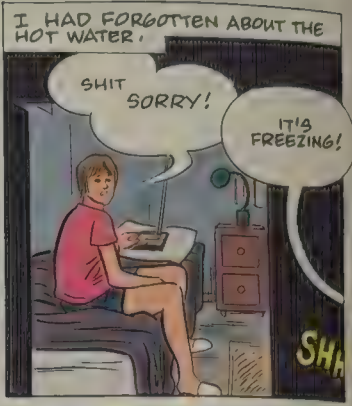

WHEN I SAW HIM WADING TOWARD ME, I KNEW FULL WELL I SHOULD PUT A STOP TO IT, TELL HIM TO GO BACK TO COLLEGE AND ENJOY HIS LIFE WITHOUT ME.

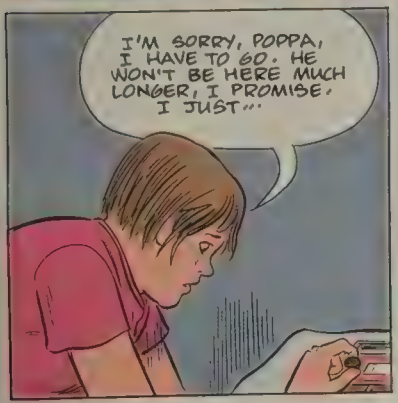

WE WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING COVERED IN SAND. I WAS IMMEDIATELY WORRIED SICK ABOUT POPPA.


I COULDN'T THINK OF A WAY TO KEEP NATHAN OUT OF THE HOUSE ANY LONGER, SO I TRIED TO MAKE IT CASUAL, LIKE IT WAS NO BIG DEAL. I MADE US A BREAKFAST OF WHEAT THINS AND BEEF JERKY WHILE I WORKED ON A PLAN.
THERE'S LOTS OF WEIRD CHEMICALS IN THE LAKE. YOU PROBABLY WANT TO TAKE A SHOWER.

THANKS TO NATHAN'S GERMOPHOBIA, I KNEW I HAD A TINY WINDOW OF TIME, A FEW MINUTES AT MOST.
POPPA? ARE YOU THERE?

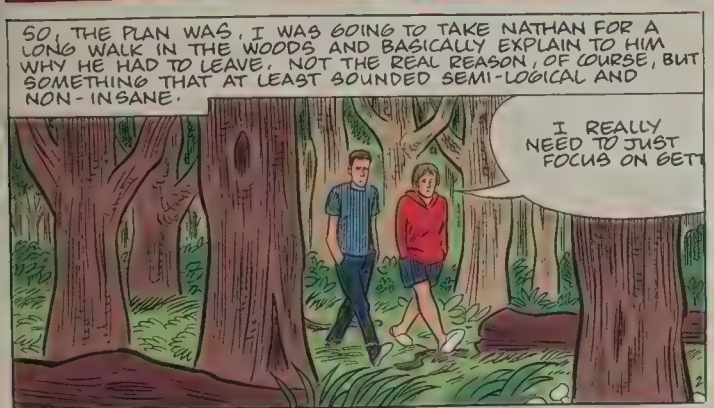
POPPA?
I ONLY HAVE LIKE TWO SECONDS BUT I JUST WANT TO MAKE SURE YOU-
YAAAAH!

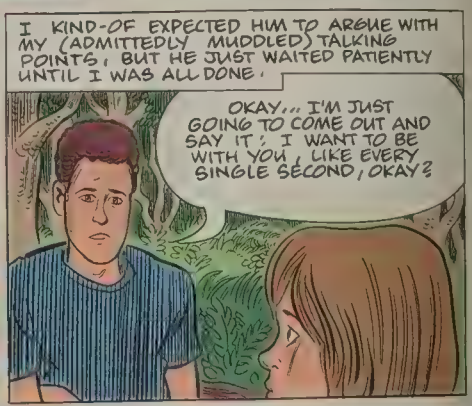

I HAD FORGOTTEN ABOUT THE HOT WATER.
SHIT
SORRY!
IT'S FREEZING!
SH


I'M SORRY, POPPA, I HAVE TO GO. HE WON'T BE HERE MUCH LONGER, I PROMISE. I JUST...

POPPA? CAN YOU HEAR ME?
POPPA?

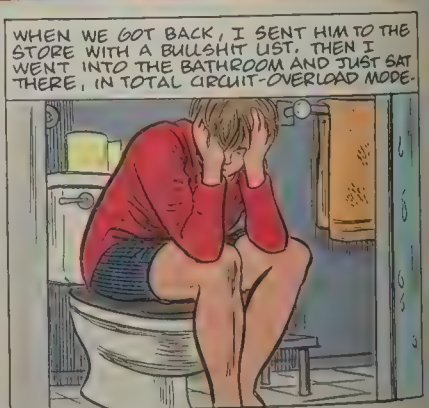
I HEAR YOU.

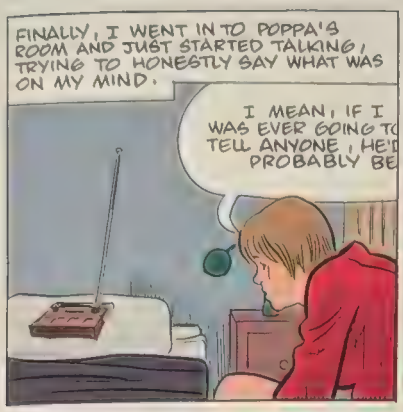

SO, THE PLAN WAS, I WAS GOING TO TAKE NATHAN FOR A LONG WALK IN THE WOODS AND BASICALLY EXPLAIN TO HIM WHY HE HAD TO LEAVE, NOT THE REAL REASON, OF COURSE, BUT SOMETHING THAT AT LEAST SOUNDED SEMI-LOGICAL AND NON-INSANE.
I REALLY NEED TO JUST FOCUS ON GET

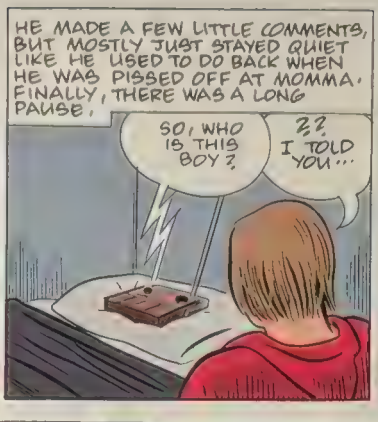

I KIND-OF EXPECTED HIM TO ARGUE WITH MY (ADMITTEDLY MUDDLED) TALKING POINTS, BUT HE JUST WAITED PATIENTLY UNTIL I WAS ALL DONE.
OKAY... I'M JUST GOING TO COME OUT AND SAY IT: I WANT TO BE WITH YOU, LIKE EVERY SINGLE SECOND, OKAY?

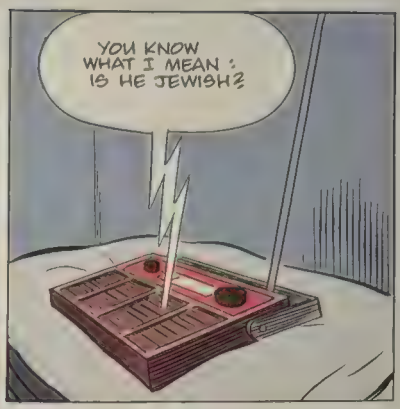
I JUST GOT THIS HUGE NEW APARTMENT OFF-CAMPUS, YOU WOULD LOVE IT, I THINK...
OH, WOW... LIKE I SAID, I HAVE SO MUCH TO DO HERE, I CAN'T EVEN THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE AND ALL THAT, NOT RIGHT NOW...

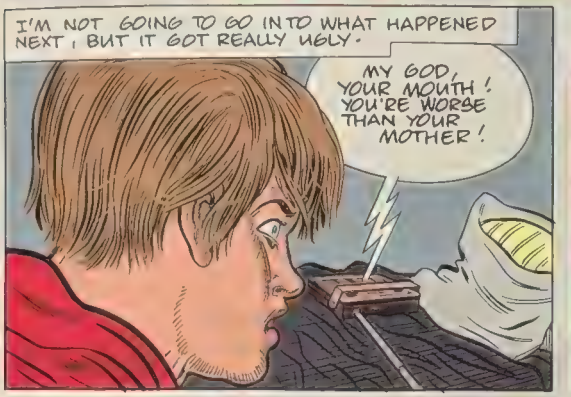
I'M GOING TO STAY AND HELP YOU, AS LONG AS IT TAKES. YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE TO DEAL WITH THIS BY YOURSELF.

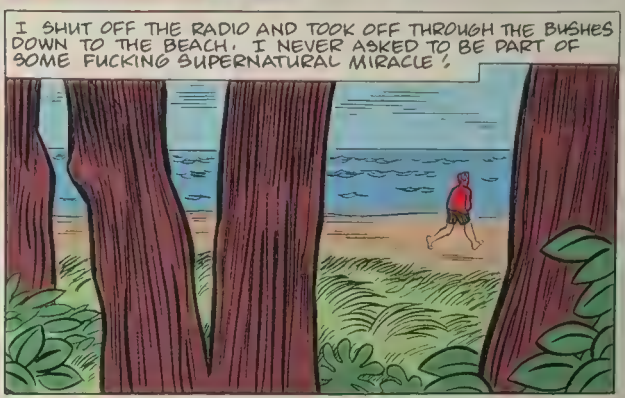

WHEN WE GOT BACK, I SENT HIM TO THE STORE WITH A BULLSHIT LIST. THEN I WENT INTO THE BATHROOM AND JUST SAT THERE, IN TOTAL CIRCUIT-OVERLOAD MODE.


FINALLY, I WENT IN TO POPPA'S ROOM AND JUST STARTED TALKING, TRYING TO HONESTLY SAY WHAT WAS ON MY MIND.
I MEAN, IF I WAS EVER GOING TO TELL ANYONE, HE'D PROBABLY BE

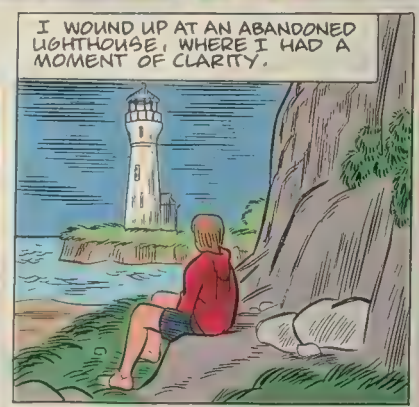

HE MADE A FEW LITTLE COMMENTS, BUT MOSTLY JUST STAYED QUIET LIKE HE USED TO DO BACK WHEN HE WAS PISSED OFF AT MOMMA. FINALLY, THERE WAS A LONG PAUSE.
SO, WHO IS THIS BOY?
??
I TOLD YOU...


YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN: IS HE JEWISH?


I'M NOT GOING TO GO INTO WHAT HAPPENED NEXT, BUT IT GOT REALLY UGLY.
MY GOD, YOUR MOUTH! YOU'RE WORSE THAN YOUR MOTHER!


I SHUT OFF THE RADIO AND TOOK OFF THROUGH THE BUSHES DOWN TO THE BEACH. I NEVER ASKED TO BE PART OF SOME FUCKING SUPERNATURAL MIRACLE!

I KEPT WALKING UNTIL IT WAS ALMOST SUNDOWN, HOURS AND HOURS. NATHAN WAS PROBABLY FREAKING OUT, BUT I JUST COULDN'T STOP.


I WOUND UP AT AN ABANDONED LIGHTHOUSE, WHERE I HAD A MOMENT OF CLARITY.

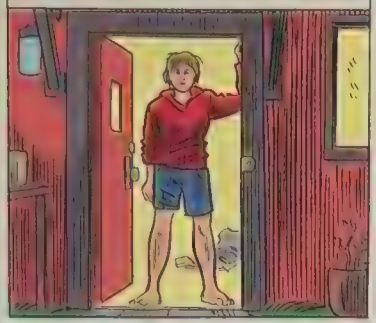
IT WAS LATE WHEN I GOT BACK. THE LIGHTS WERE ON IN THE HOUSE AND I COULD HEAR LOUD MUSIC.

THE PLACE WAS IN DISARRAY, BIG BLACK CONTRACTOR BAGS FILLED WITH STUFF. NATHAN WAS IN POPPA'S ROOM.
IS THAT YOU?

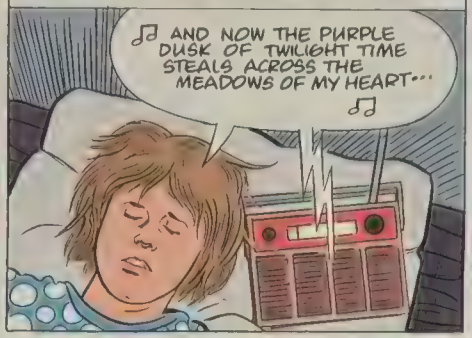
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
I TOLD YOU, I'M GOING TO HELP YOU DEAL WITH ALL THIS CRAP SO WE CAN GET OUT OF HERE.

AND THAT'S WHEN I PRETTY MUCH SNAPPED.
I WANT TO FLY LIKE AN EAGLE

NATHAN LEFT LATER THAT NIGHT, ONCE AND FOR ALL. THERE WAS NO WAY I WOULD EVER SEE HIM AGAIN AFTER WHAT I SAID.



I WENT BACK TO MY LIFE WITH POPPA. THERE WAS SOME TENSION AT FIRST, BUT EVENTUALLY WE CAME TOGETHER AGAIN.



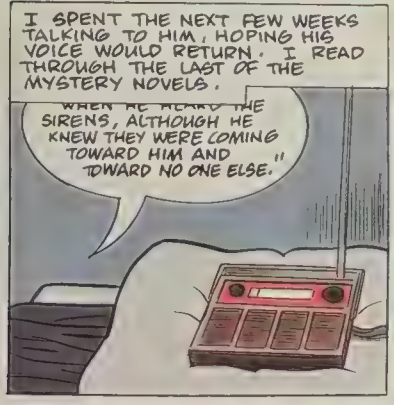
OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, HIS SIGNAL STARTED TO FADE.

FIRST, I TURNED THE VOLUME ALL THE WAY UP, AND THEN I BOUGHT A FANCY ANTENNA AT THE HARDWARE STORE IN RED LAKE.

IT JUST KEPT GETTING WEAKER AND WEAKER UNTIL FINALLY, IT WAS GONE.

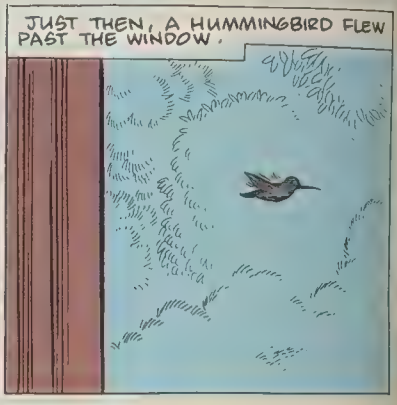
I REMEMBER HIS LAST AUDIBLE WORDS.

I SPENT THE NEXT FEW WEEKS TALKING TO HIM, HOPING HIS VOICE WOULD RETURN. I READ THROUGH THE LAST OF THE MYSTERY NOVELS.



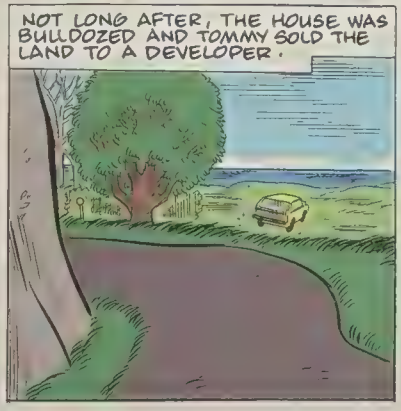
ONE DAY, I ASKED HIM FOR A SIGN. I HAD AN IMPORTANT QUESTION I NEEDED TO ASK HIM.

JUST THEN, A HUMMINGBIRD FLEW PAST THE WINDOW.



I BURIED THE RADIO NEAR AN OLD CYPRESS TREE IN THE WOODS AND LOCKED UP THE HOUSE. I GOT IN MY CAR AND HEADED OUT.

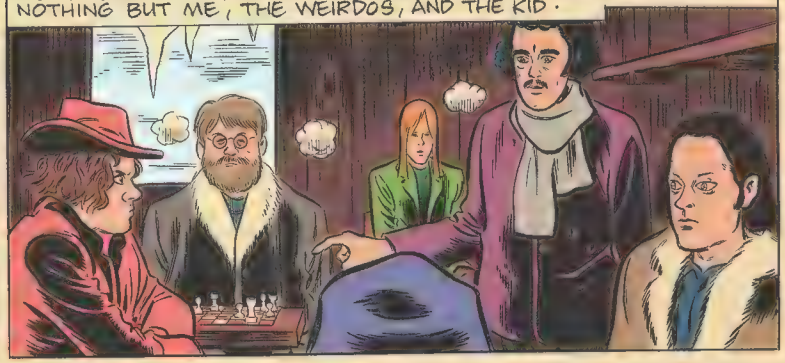
NOT LONG AFTER, THE HOUSE WAS BULLDOZED AND TOMMY SOLD THE LAND TO A DEVELOPER.



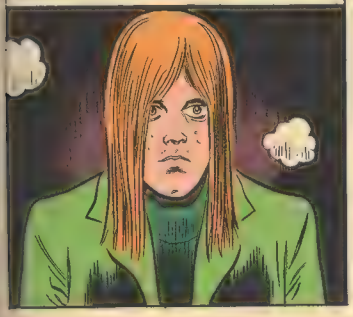
BY THE TIME I WOKE UP FROM MY COMA, EVERYTHING WAS GONE.

THERE I SAT, TWELVE HUNDRED FEET ABOVE THE SNOWLINE IN AN ABANDONED DONKEY SHED, WEARING A FAKE BEARD AND WAITING FOR A BREAK IN THE WEATHER.

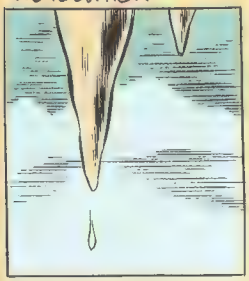
I'D BEEN THERE THREE WEEKS, POSING AS A MUTE WOODCHOPPER. NO PHONE CALLS, RADIO SIGNALS, VISITORS, OR NEWSPAPERS. NOTHING BUT ME, THE WEIRDOS, AND THE KID.



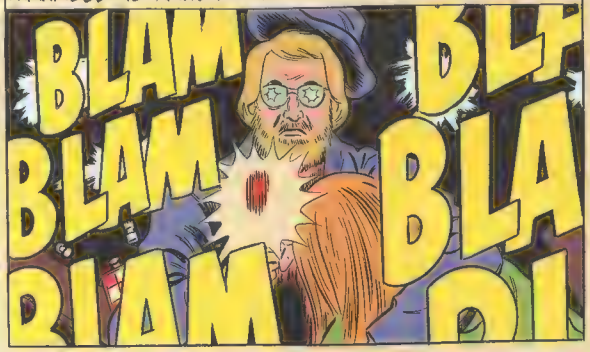
I'D BEEN HIRED BY THE BOY'S MOTHER TO BRING HIM HOME. ALL I NEEDED WAS A SIGN THAT THE ROAD HAD THAWED AND I'D MAKE MY MOVE.



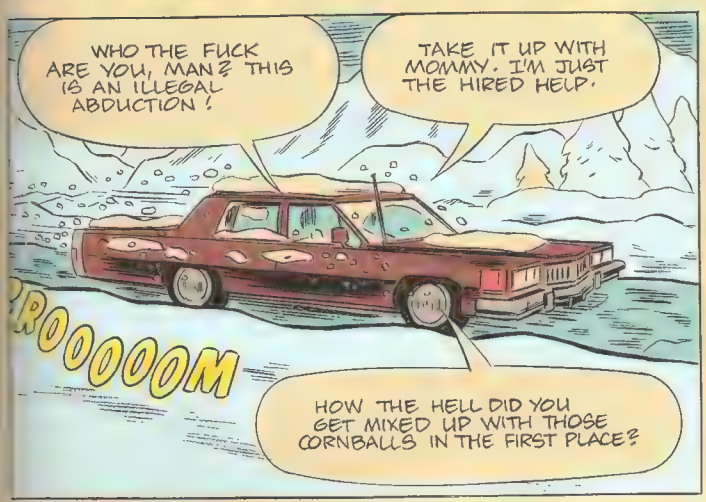
SHE SAID HE'D BEEN TAKEN AGAINST HIS WILL, BUT IT SEEMED TO ME HE WAS PRETTY PUMPED TO BE A PART OF THEIR LITTLE REVOLUTION.



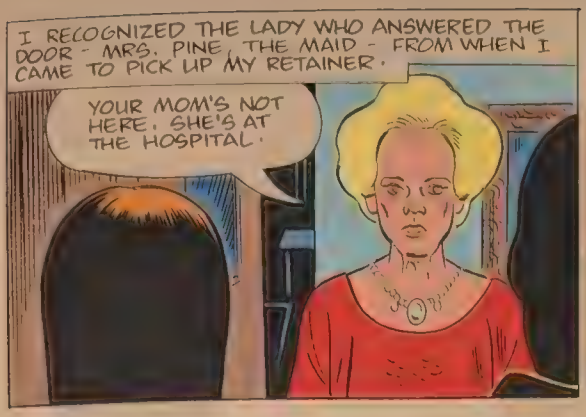
ANYWAY, ONCE IT ALL WENT DOWN, THINGS GOT A LITTLE MESSIER THAN I'D HAVE LIKED, BUT I MANAGED TO HAUL HIM OUT OF THERE IN ONE PIECE.

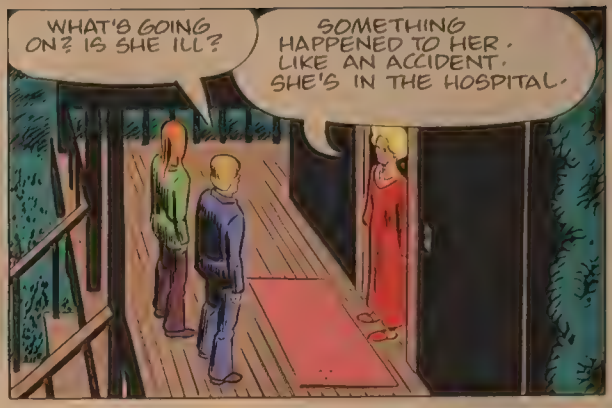


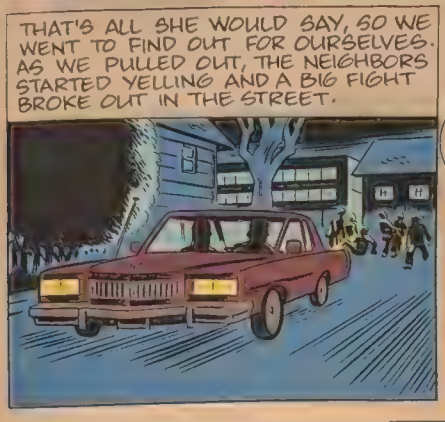
THE INCIDENT


WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU, MAN? THIS IS AN ILLEGAL ABDUCTION!
TAKE IT UP WITH MOMMY. I'M JUST THE HIRED HELP.
VROOOOOM
HOW THE HELL DID YOU GET MIXED UP WITH THOSE CORNBALLS IN THE FIRST PLACE?

WE MADE IT TO THE MAIN HIGHWAY, BUT THERE WAS A ROADBLOCK AT THE ONRAMP. I THOUGHT MAYBE IT WAS ABOUT THE BUSINESS BACK AT THE DONKEY RANCH, BUT NOPE.
NO CARS GOING TO THE CITY.
ONE OF THE OFFICERS HAPPENED TO BE AN OLD BUDDY.
HEY GEORGE, IT'S ME, JOHNNY! WHAT'S GOING ON?
SORRY, JOHNNY. YOU GOTTA HEAD BACK.
LISTEN, GEORGE, THE BOY'S GOTTA GET TO HIS MOTHER. SHE'S WORRIED SICK. CAN'T YOU LET US THROUGH?
NORMALLY, GEORGE WAS AN EASYGOING GUY, BUT THE WAY HE LOOKED AT ME... I DUNNO...
WHAT IS IT, GEORGE? WHAT'S THE MATTER?
I SAID TURN AROUND.
LUCKILY, I KNEW A BACK WAY THROUGH THE DESERT HILLS.
WHERE THE FUCK ARE WE GOING NOW?
TO YOUR MOM'S HOUSE, LIKE I SAID. I NEED THE OTHER HALF OF MY DOUGH.
I TURNED ON THE RADIO, HOPING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WAS GOING ON. SOMETHING HAD DEFINITELY HAPPENED, BUT I'LL BE DAMNED IF I COULD FIGURE OUT WHAT IT WAS.
WE MADE IT TO NORTH INGELWOOD BY SUNDOWN. THE MOUNTAIN ROAD LED US RIGHT INTO THE KID'S NEIGHBORHOOD.
THE ONE ON THE CORNER - THAT'S MOTHER'S PLACE, CORRECT?
I TOLD YOU, I DON'T WANT TO SEE HER!
TOUGH SHIT.
I RANG THREE, FOUR, FIVE TIMES, BUT SHE DIDN'T ANSWER.
DONG
DONG
DONG
SOME NEIGHBORS WERE CHECKING US OUT. RUBBERNECKERS, THE KID HAD A REPUTATION, I'M GUESSING.

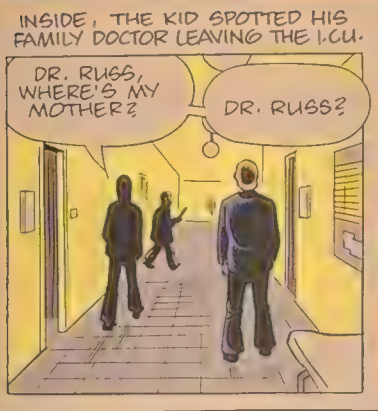

I RECOGNIZED THE LADY WHO ANSWERED THE DOOR - MRS. PINE, THE MAID - FROM WHEN I CAME TO PICK UP MY RETAINER.
YOUR MOM'S NOT HERE. SHE'S AT THE HOSPITAL.


WHAT'S GOING ON? IS SHE ILL?
SOMETHING HAPPENED TO HER. LIKE AN ACCIDENT. SHE'S IN THE HOSPITAL.

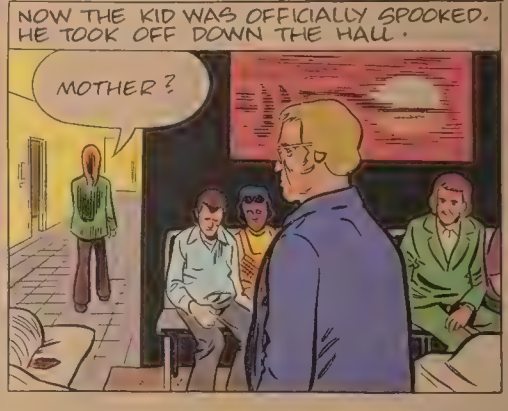

THAT'S ALL SHE WOULD SAY, SO WE WENT TO FIND OUT FOR OURSELVES. AS WE PULLED OUT, THE NEIGHBORS STARTED YELLING AND A BIG FIGHT BROKE OUT IN THE STREET.

THE KID WAS PRETTY SHAKEN. HE'D KNOWN MRS. PINE SINCE HE WAS A BABY.
SHE WAS WEARING MY MOTHER'S DRESS.

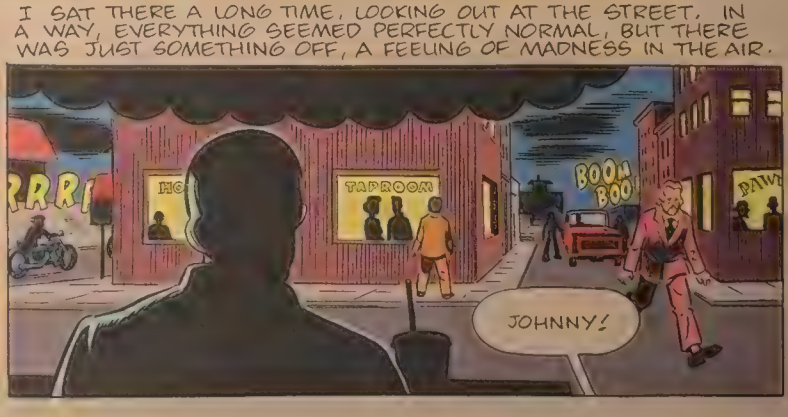
COULD ALL THIS HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH OUR BUDDIES AT THE RANCH?
HOSPITAL
I DON'T KNOW... HOW COULD IT?

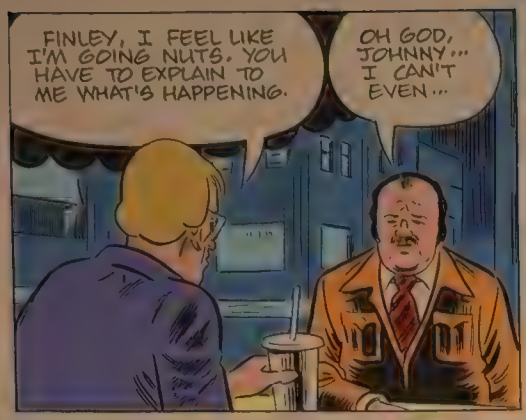

INSIDE, THE KID SPOTTED HIS FAMILY DOCTOR LEAVING THE I.C.U.
DR. RUSS, WHERE'S MY MOTHER?
DR. RUSS?

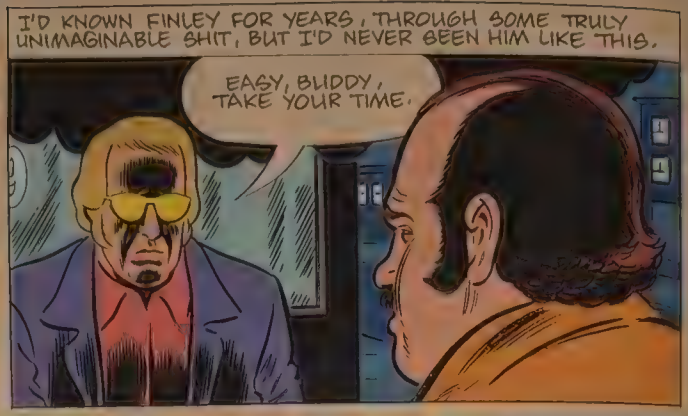
LOOK, I CAN'T DO THIS RIGHT NOW, SO GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY FACE, OKAY?

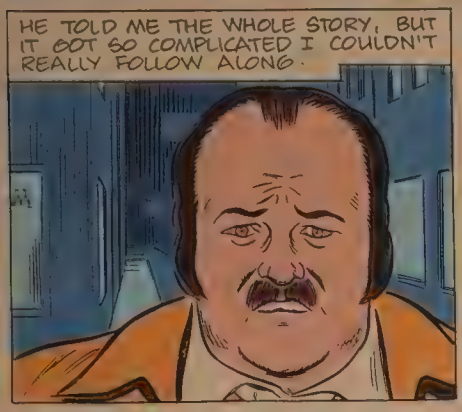

NOW THE KID WAS OFFICIALLY SPOOKED. HE TOOK OFF DOWN THE HALL.
MOTHER?

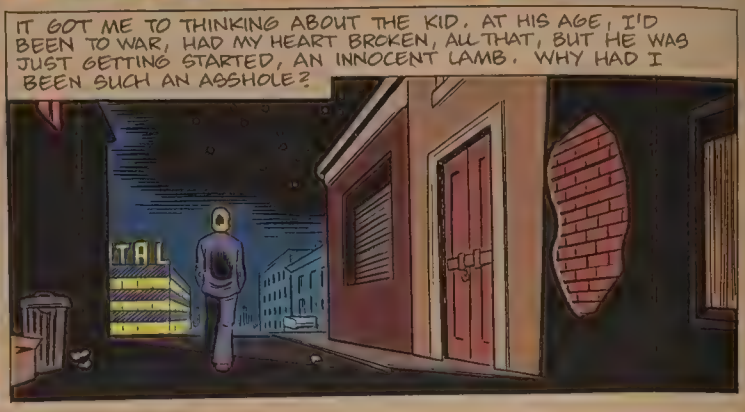
I CALLED THE OFFICE AND LEFT A MESSAGE FOR FINLEY TO COME MEET ME AT THE HOT DOG STAND.

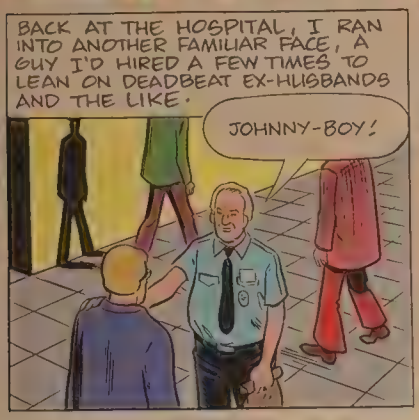

I SAT THERE A LONG TIME, LOOKING OUT AT THE STREET. IN A WAY, EVERYTHING SEEMED PERFECTLY NORMAL, BUT THERE WAS JUST SOMETHING OFF, A FEELING OF MADNESS IN THE AIR.
TAPROOM
BOOM BOOM
JOHNNY!

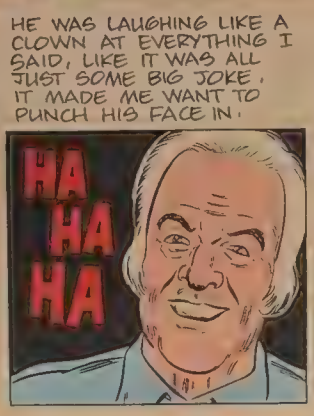

FINLEY, I FEEL LIKE I'M GOING NUTS. YOU HAVE TO EXPLAIN TO ME WHAT'S HAPPENING.
OH GOD, JOHNNY... I CAN'T EVEN...

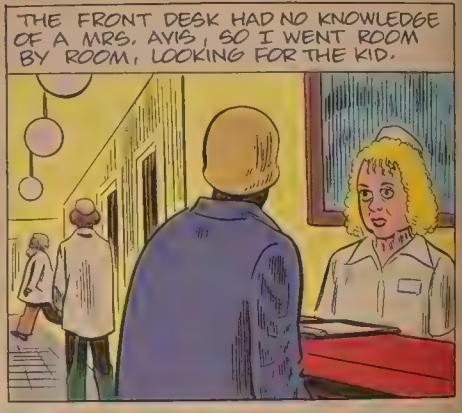

I'D KNOWN FINLEY FOR YEARS, THROUGH SOME TRULY UNIMAGINABLE SHIT, BUT I'D NEVER SEEN HIM LIKE THIS.
EASY, BUDDY, TAKE YOUR TIME.

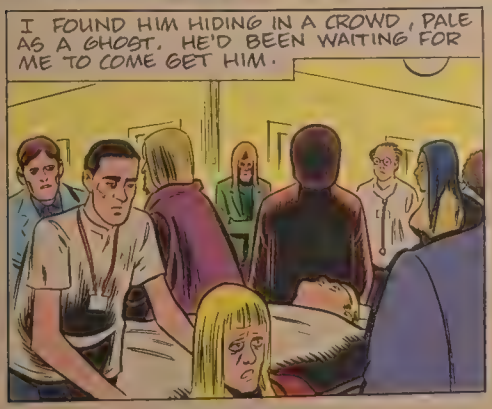

HE TOLD ME THE WHOLE STORY, BUT IT GOT SO COMPLICATED I COULDN'T REALLY FOLLOW ALONG.


IT GOT ME TO THINKING ABOUT THE KID. AT HIS AGE, I'D BEEN TO WAR, HAD MY HEART BROKEN, ALL THAT, BUT HE WAS JUST GETTING STARTED, AN INNOCENT LAMB. WHY HAD I BEEN SUCH AN ASSHOLE?
TAL

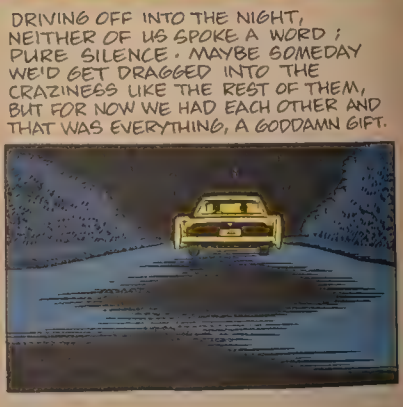

BACK AT THE HOSPITAL, I RAN INTO ANOTHER FAMILIAR FACE, A GUY I'D HIRED A FEW TIMES TO LEAN ON DEADBEAT EX-HUSBANDS AND THE LIKE.
JOHNNY-BOY!


HE WAS LAUGHING LIKE A CLOWN AT EVERYTHING I SAID, LIKE IT WAS ALL JUST SOME BIG JOKE. IT MADE ME WANT TO PUNCH HIS FACE IN.
HA HA HA


THE FRONT DESK HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OF A MRS. AVIS, SO I WENT ROOM BY ROOM, LOOKING FOR THE KID.


I FOUND HIM HIDING IN A CROWD, PALE AS A GHOST. HE'D BEEN WAITING FOR ME TO COME GET HIM.

BEFORE I COULD SAY ANYTHING, HE INDICATED WITH A SIDEWAYS LOOK THAT WE NEEDED TO GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE WHILE WE HAD A CHANCE.


DRIVING OFF INTO THE NIGHT, NEITHER OF US SPOKE A WORD; PURE SILENCE. MAYBE SOMEDAY WE'D GET DRAGGED INTO THE CRAZINESS LIKE THE REST OF THEM, BUT FOR NOW WE HAD EACH OTHER AND THAT WAS EVERYTHING, A GODDAMN GIFT.

MY UNCLE TOMMY DIED TEN YEARS AGO AND LEFT MY CHILDHOOD HOME AND ITS CONTENTS TO HIS COMICALLY-UNWORTHY WIFE AND HER OBESE CRIMINAL SON.
THEY'RE JU
GETTING SET U
IT SHOULDN
THE POINT BEING, I'M OFFICIALLY ALL ALONE IN THIS WORLD: NO KIDS, COUSINS, AUNTS; NOT EVEN A PET (ALLERGIES).
IT'S JUST A FAREWELL PUFF PIECE FOR THE WEBSITE, TOTALLY BASIC.
AND NO, I NEVER GOT MARRIED OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT. THERE WERE A FEW BOYFRIENDS (AND ONE GIRLFRIEND), BUT NOTHING EVER LASTED MORE THAN A FEW MONTHS.
WHAT'S SO FUNNY?
I CAN'T HELP IT. I JUST
WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?
FORTUNATELY, HOWEVER, DESPITE ALL THE PAIN IN MY PERSONAL LIFE, I WAS SOMEHOW BLESSED WITH THAT PARTICULAR JOYFULLY-OBSESSIVE CONTROL-FREAK ANXIETY ONE SO OFTEN FINDS IN OVER-ACHIEVERS.
YOU READY?
ALL SET!
OKAY, SO... YOUR STORY BEGINS AT A LOW POINT. YOU WERE IN A TERRIBLE CAR ACCIDENT?
THAT WAS MY STOCK ANSWER. THE REALITY WAS MUCH WEIRDER.
IN MY MEMORY, THE ACCIDENT HAD TAKEN PLACE ON A WARM, SUNNY FALL AFTERNOON.
YOU SKIDDED ON A PATCH OF BLACK ICE AND LANDED IN A SNOWBANK. WITHOUT THAT CUSHION, YOU NEVER WOULD HAVE SURVIVED.

OVER TIME, I CAME TO ACCEPT THAT THE EVENTS OF THOSE IMPOSSIBLE WEEKS AT THE LAKE HOUSE WERE SOME COMA-INDUCED HALLUCINATION, A LONG, COMPLICATED DREAM.

NO, PLEASE... WHAT WERE YOU GOING TO SAY?

WOVEN THROUGH THE DELUSION, THOUGH, WERE STRANDS OF REALITY - NATHAN CONFIRMED ON FACEBOOK, FOR INSTANCE, THAT HE HAD INDEED BEEN THERE - BUT AS FOR THE REST OF IT, WHO KNOWS?

AFTER I LEFT THE I.C.U., MY LIFE STARTED OVER, A TOTAL REGET. I LEARNED TO WALK AND TALK AGAIN, LIKE A NEWBORN, AND STRUCK OUT ON MY OWN.

A FEW YEARS LATER, I FOUND MYSELF LIVING WITH SOME UNSTABLE DRUG-ABUSER FRIENDS, WORKING SHIT-JOB RETAIL, TRYING TO CLAW MY WAY OUT OF THE TRAP.

(S)TONY

SHE WAS LIKE, "HER FUCKING BATHROOM COST MORE THAN I'LL EVER MAKE IN MY WHOLE LIFE!"

MY BEST FRIEND (ISH), LIZA B.

AN OLD FRIEND OF LIZA'S HAD JUST BEEN FIRED FROM HER JOB AS THE PERSONAL ASSISTANT TO SOME RICH LADY.

SO WAIT, THE JOB IS STILL OPEN?

HA! YOU'RE SUCH A VULTURE!

"I'M LESS VALUABLE THAN A FUCKING FAUCET!"

BACK IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, HEATHER HAD BEEN A HUGELY SUCCESSFUL TEEN CATALOG MODEL.

A.

B.

SHE GRADUATED TO TV, TAKING OVER AS FEATURED SPINNER ON TREASURE CHEST AND "GROWING HER BRAND."

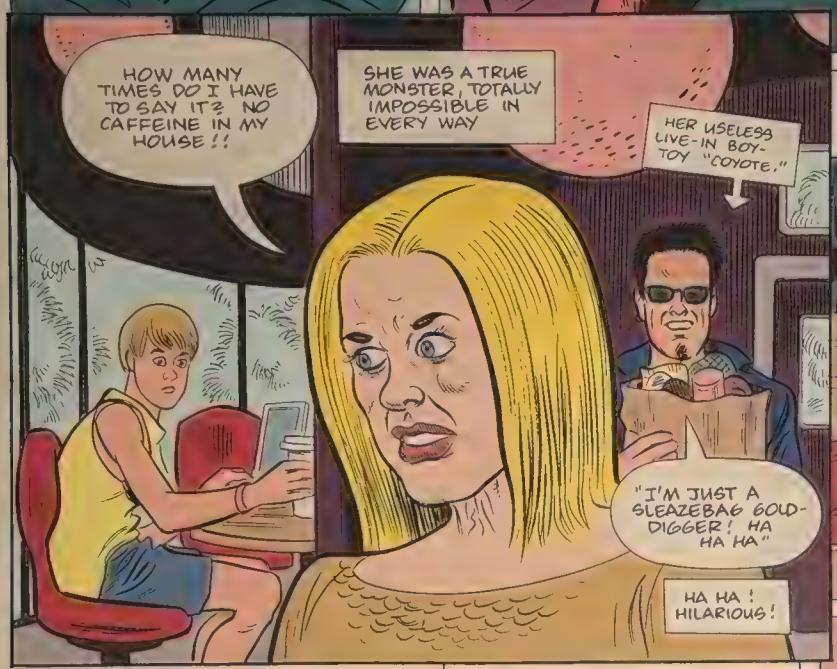
GOLD... SILVER. DIAMO

THERE FOLLOWED A SERIES OF SOFT-CORE CINEMAX THRILLERS MADE FOR EROTIC HOUSWIVES AND LINGERIE WEIRDOS.

TASTE THE SWEET KISS OF VENGEA

AND THEN, AT LAST, A SERIES OF POPULAR ADS FOR CLARITY MOISTURIZER WHICH LED TO A CUSHY POST-SHOWBIZ CAREER DOING "OUTREACH" FOR THE COMPANY.

I ASKED YOU EARLIER ABOUT MENTORS...?
AND SO, AFTER ANOTHER BAD DAY AT SWANN'S, I TOOK THE JOB. SHE JUST STARTED ORDERING ME AROUND DURING THE INTERVIEW, LIKE SHE DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE I WAS A DIFFERENT GIRL.


HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO SAY IT? NO CAFFEINE IN MY HOUSE!!
SHE WAS A TRUE MONSTER, TOTALLY IMPOSSIBLE IN EVERY WAY
HER USELESS LIVE-IN BOY-TOY "COYOTE."
"I'M JUST A SLEAZEBAG GOLD-DIGGER! HA HA HA"
HA HA! HILARIOUS!

HER NARCISSISM WAS SUCH THAT SHE DOMINATED EVERY THOUGHT, EVEN DURING OFF HOURS. NOBODY WANTED TO TALK ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE.
WAIT, ARE YOU SERIOUS? WHAT DID YOU DO?

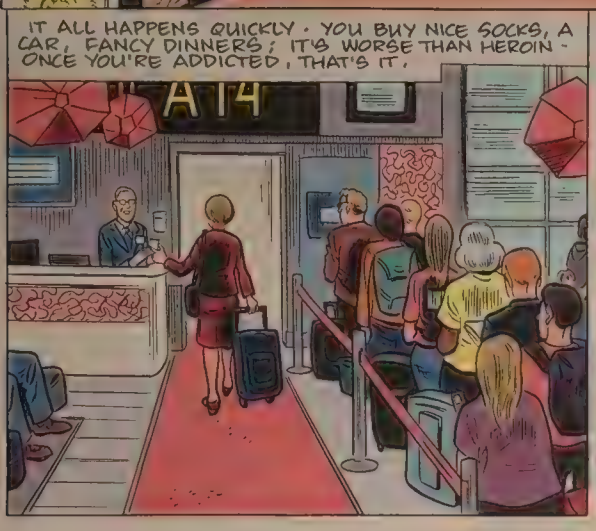
ONE NIGHT, AFTER A FEW MONTHS ON THE JOB, I GOT DRAGGED AGAINST MY WILL TO A HORRIBLE HIPSTER BAR, WE'D JUST BEEN SITTING THERE A FEW MINUTES WHEN I LOOK ACROSS THE ROOM AND THERE'S COYOTE, GETTING A FAKE BLOW-JOB FROM SOME FIONA APPLE CHICK.

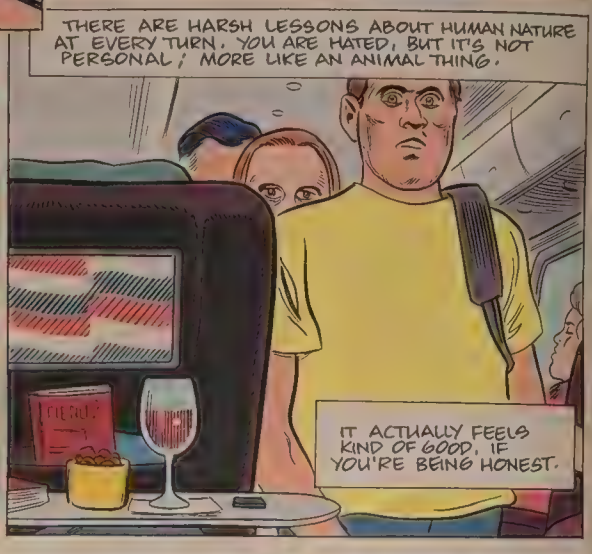
I HATE TO ADMIT IT, BUT I COULDN'T WAIT TO TELL HEATHER. THIS WAS GOING TO BE HUGE, I'D HAVE ENDLESS STORIES ABOUT THE BRUTAL RECKONING TO COME.

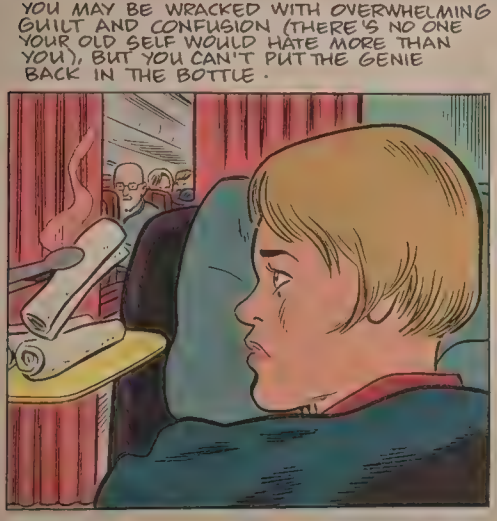
AFTER THAT, SHE NEEDED ME MORE THAN EVER. I WOUND UP PRETTY MUCH MOVING IN, A LA SUNSET BLVD. (WAS I WILLIAM HOLDEN OR MAX?)
HER ONLY OUTSIDE SUPPORT CAME FROM DR. AQUARIAS, A THERAPEUTIC SPIRITUALIST SHE MET ON A PSYCHIC HOTLINE. SHE SEEMED TO TAKE GREAT COMFORT FROM HIS ABSURD NONSENSE.
THE STARS ARE PRACTICALLY YELLING AT YOU: "GET OUT AND HAVE SOME FUN!"
"GET LAID, FOR GOD'S SAKE!"
ALL HER FRIENDS WERE OLD AND BORING, SO SHE TRICKED ME INTO MAKING PLANS TO GO OUT AND THEN ASKED IF SHE COULD TAG ALONG.
I KNOW, I KNOW. THEY ALL HATE ME, RIGHT?
SHE WAS TOTALLY "ON" THAT NIGHT, HER MOST CHARMING POSSIBLE SELF. MY FRIENDS WERE DAZZLED AND STARSTRUCK, NOT A HINT OF THEIR USUAL KNOW-IT-ALL CYNICISM.
HE HAD A COCK THE SIZE OF A PEPPERIDGE FARM GOLDFISH!
IT TURNED OUT TO BE A CRAZY, MEMORABLE NIGHT, ONE FOR THE AGES.
CE SOIR!
WE WOUND UP AT SOME LUNATIC HAIRDRESSER'S HOUSE, SNORTING COKE AND PLAYING STRIP KARAOKE.
AT THE END OF THE NIGHT, SHE FORCED ME TO DRIVE HER HOME. IT WAS MY FIRST TIME SINCE THE ACCIDENT.
OH GOD, GET OVER YOURSELF! LOOSEN UP!
SO... MONICA... TELL ME... WHY DO YOU HAVE SUCH AWFUL FRIENDS?
SHE WENT THROUGH THE LIST, ONE BY ONE, CHARTING OUT THEIR FUTURE LIVES.
... SHE'S GOING TO STAY THE WAY SHE IS, STUCK IN HER LITTLE RUT WHILE THE WORLD PASSES HER BY. THEN IT'LL BE EVERYBODY ELSE'S FAULT - YOU ESPECIALLY. THINGS WILL GO DOWNHILL FAST...
OVER THE YEARS, IT ALL CAME TRUE, DOWN IN MANY CASES TO THE SMALLEST DETAIL.
BUT YOU? THERE'S STILL A SHRED OF HOPE...

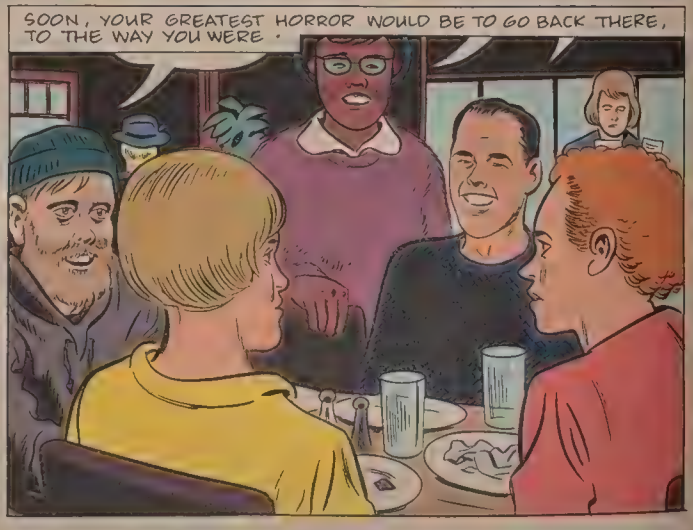
SUCCESS HAS A STRANGE EFFECT ON PEOPLE. YOU THINK YOU'LL JUST STAY THE SAME AS BEFORE, "KEEP IT REAL," AND ALL THAT. BUT NO, YOU'LL CHANGE IN WAYS THAT ARE BOTH HARD TO IMAGINE AND ENTIRELY PREDICTABLE.
SUCCESS

YOU HEAR PEOPLE SAY, "I DON'T EVEN CARE ABOUT SUCCESS, I'M HAPPY THE WAY I AM," BUT THE TRUTH IS, YOU DO CARE, AND NO YOU'RE NOT.


IT ALL HAPPENS QUICKLY. YOU BUY NICE SOCKS, A CAR, FANCY DINNERS; IT'S WORSE THAN HEROIN - ONCE YOU'RE ADDICTED, THAT'S IT.
A14


THERE ARE HARSH LESSONS ABOUT HUMAN NATURE AT EVERY TURN. YOU ARE HATED, BUT IT'S NOT PERSONAL; MORE LIKE AN ANIMAL THING.
IT ACTUALLY FEELS KIND OF GOOD, IF YOU'RE BEING HONEST.


YOU MAY BE WRACKED WITH OVERWHELMING GUILT AND CONFUSION (THERE'S NO ONE YOUR OLD SELF WOULD HATE MORE THAN YOU), BUT YOU CAN'T PUT THE GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE.

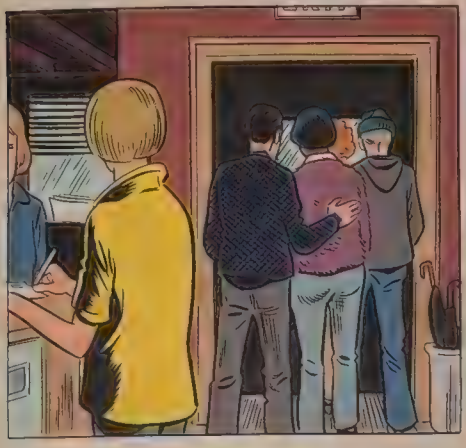

SOON, YOUR GREATEST HORROR WOULD BE TO GO BACK THERE, TO THE WAY YOU WERE.

FOR ALL ITS PERILS, THOUGH, SUCCESS CAN IN ITS EARLIEST STAGES REVEAL TO YOU THE MOST AUTHENTIC VERSION OF YOUR TRUE SELF.

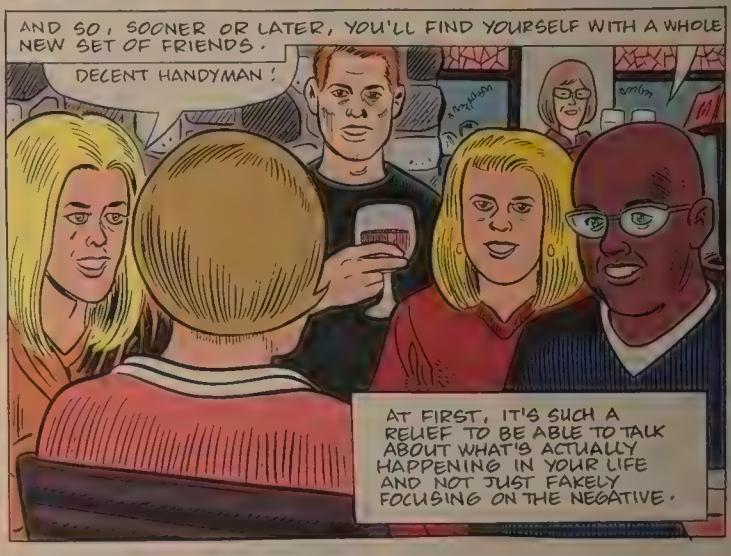
IT'S LIKE GOING ON ANTIDEPRESSANTS. NOTHING FEELS MORE "REAL" THAN THE MISERABLE WORLDVIEW OF THE AFFLICTED, BUT THE RIGHT MEDS CAN CLEAR AWAY THE DISTORTIONS.

OVER TIME, THOUGH, IT DISFIGURES AND PERVERTS. YOU BECOME BLIND TO YOUR OWN MONSTROUS WAYS.

SOON ENOUGH, THERE'S AN UNBRIDGEABLE DIVIDE. YOU COULD GIVE THEM ALL YOUR MONEY, REJECT THE SPOTLIGHT, TAKE A VOW OF CELIBACY - WHATEVER IT IS - AND THEY'D STILL HATE YOU FOREVER.

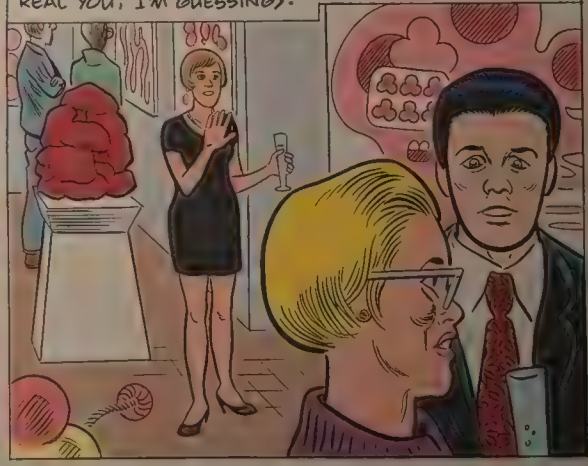


AND SO, SOONER OR LATER, YOU'LL FIND YOURSELF WITH A WHOLE NEW SET OF FRIENDS.

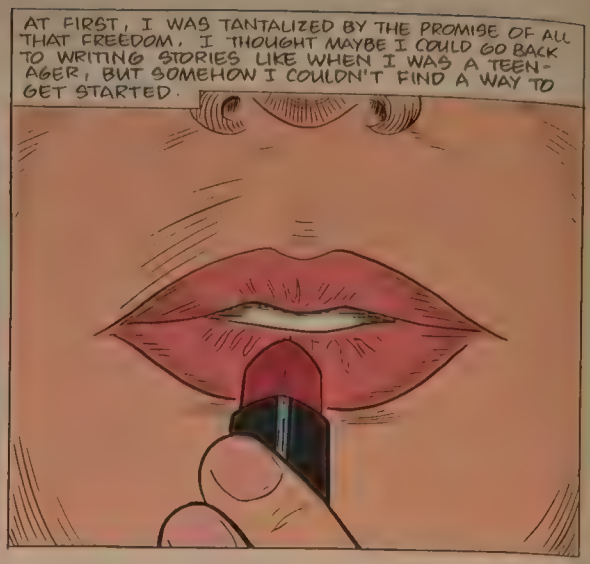

DECENT HANDYMAN!
AT FIRST, IT'S SUCH A RELIEF TO BE ABLE TO TALK ABOUT WHAT'S ACTUALLY HAPPENING IN YOUR LIFE AND NOT JUST FAKELY FOCUSING ON THE NEGATIVE.

BUT THEN THIS CREEPY RANKING INSTINCT KICKS IN AND INFLECTS EVERY SINGLE INTERACTION. YOU HAVE TO ADAPT TO A WHOLE NEW SYSTEM OF SELF-APPRAISAL.

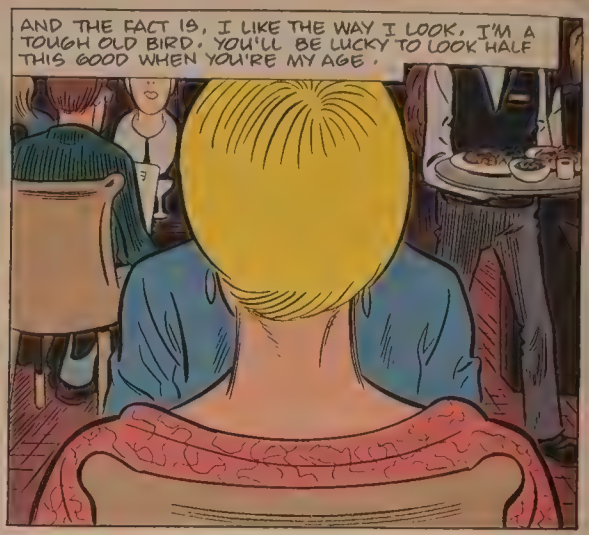
I REALLY DO WISH I COULD BE MORE LIKE THE PERSON I'M PRETENDING TO BE IN THIS INTERVIEW. THE REAL ME WOULD BE SO LOATHED (AS WOULD THE REAL YOU, I'M GUESSING).

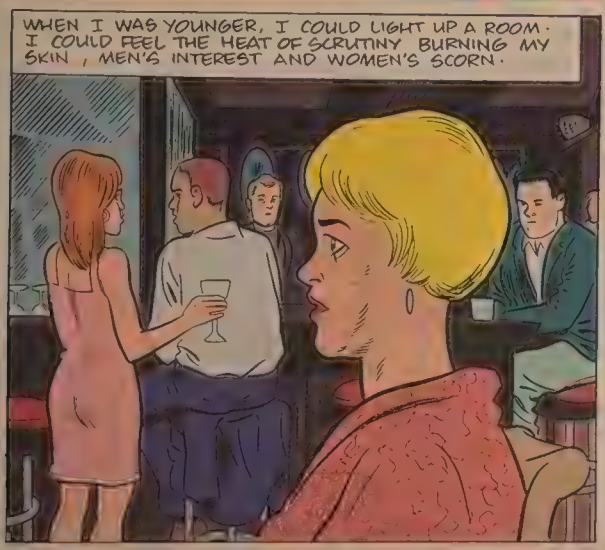


IN TRUTH, I REALLY DIDN'T WANT TO SELL MY COMPANY, BUT SUCCESS BRINGS FORTH A VAST SWARM OF LEECHES AND LAMPREYS; SOONER OR LATER THEY CAN BRING DOWN THE WHALE.

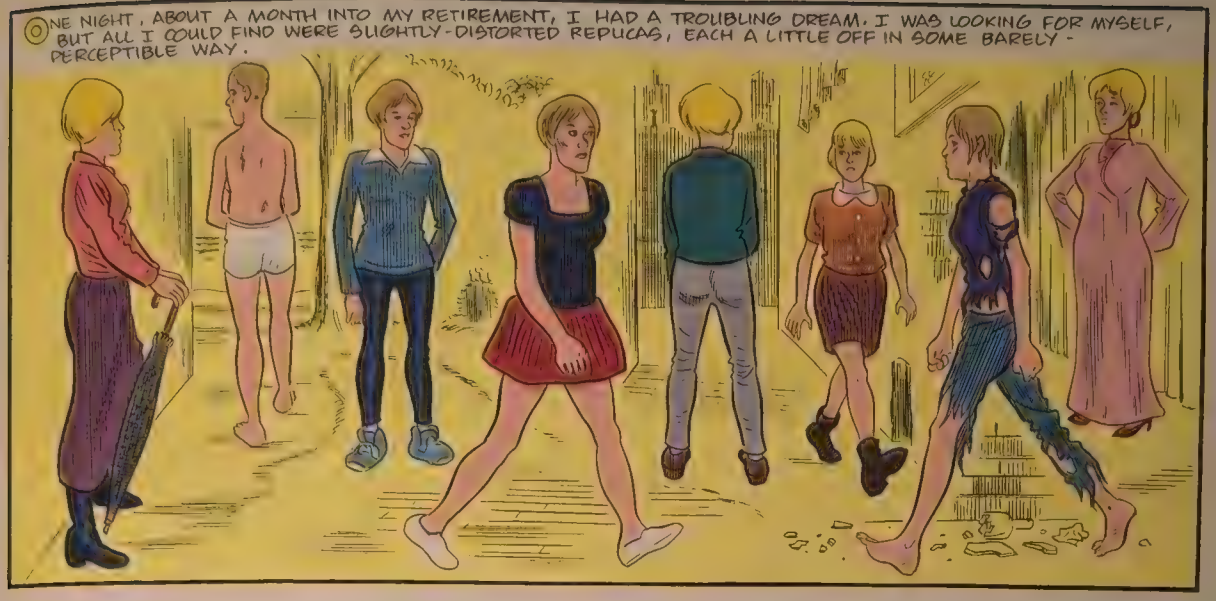

AT FIRST, I WAS TANTALIZED BY THE PROMISE OF ALL THAT FREEDOM. I THOUGHT MAYBE I COULD GO BACK TO WRITING STORIES LIKE WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER, BUT SOMEHOW I COULDN'T FIND A WAY TO GET STARTED.

AFTER ALL THE SHIT I WENT THROUGH WITH MY ACCIDENT, THERE WAS NO WAY I WAS GOING TO GET BOTOX, OR A MID-LIFE TIT-JOB, OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT. I'D BEEN CUT UP ENOUGH.


AND THE FACT IS, I LIKE THE WAY I LOOK. I'M A TOUGH OLD BIRD. YOU'LL BE LUCKY TO LOOK HALF THIS GOOD WHEN YOU'RE MY AGE.


WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I COULD LIGHT UP A ROOM. I COULD FEEL THE HEAT OF SCRUTINY BURNING MY SKIN, MEN'S INTEREST AND WOMEN'S SCORN.

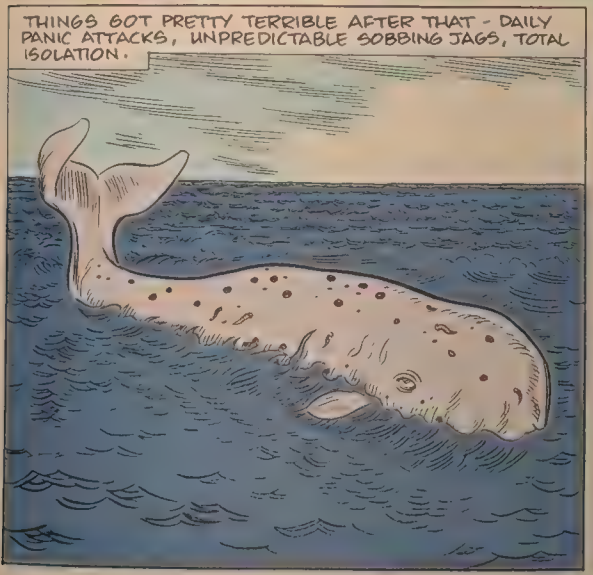
BUT NOW, IT'S LIKE I'M NOT EVEN HERE SOMETIMES.


ONE NIGHT, ABOUT A MONTH INTO MY RETIREMENT, I HAD A TROUBLING DREAM. I WAS LOOKING FOR MYSELF, BUT ALL I COULD FIND WERE SLIGHTLY-DISTORTED REPLICAS, EACH A LITTLE OFF IN SOME BARELY-PERCEPTIBLE WAY.

I DECIDED TO VISIT THE OFFICE TO SEE HOW THINGS WERE GOING. THERE HAD BEEN TALK OF MY TAKING ON A KIND-OF COLONEL SANDERS-ESQUE MASCOT ROLE. MAYBE THAT WOULDN'T BE SO BAD.
TAI
TAI

DENISE WAS NOW IN CHARGE, SET UP IN MY OLD OFFICE. I COULD TELL SHE WAS BUMMED OUT TO SEE ME.
HIII! IT'S SO GREAT TO SEE YOU!

I GUESS THE TEXANS HAD SOME DIFFERENT IDEAS ABOUT WHAT TO DO WITH THE BRAND. IT TURNS OUT ALL THEY REALLY WANTED WAS MY EMAIL LIST.
YEAH, SO WE'RE SHIFTING FOCUS A BIT, MOVING AWAY FROM THE MONICA CHARACTER...


THINGS GOT PRETTY TERRIBLE AFTER THAT - DAILY PANIC ATTACKS, UNPREDICTABLE SOBBING JAGS, TOTAL ISOLATION.

IT BECAME CLEAR THAT I NEEDED HELP.
"IMAGINE YOURSELF AS A DECOMPOSING CORPSE: FIRST, BLOATED BY MAGGOTS AND MOLD, THEN A SWARM OF FLIES, THEN MELTING INTO THE SOIL, A TIME-LAPSE OF DECAY AND GROWTH. THE SOIL IS FERTILIZED, ROOTS FORM, BRANCHES SPROUT, REACHING... FOR WHAT? TO WHOM?"

IT WAS SURPRISINGLY EASY TO TRACK DOWN DR. AQUARIAS. A QUICK SEARCH FOUND HIM ON A RANCH IN NEW MEXICO. I FLEW DOWN AND WE BEGAN A LONG, COMPLICATED SPIRITUAL JOURNEY.

MY GOD! LOOK AT YOU!

I'D NEVER HAD MUCH RELIGION. MY GRANDPARENTS TRIED THEIR BEST, BUT THEY WEREN'T REALLY THAT INTO IT, SO WE JUST DID THE BARE MINIMUM.

I'M NOT INTERESTED IN MADE-UP MUMBO-JUMBO, MONICA. I BELIEVE IN KNOWLEDGE.

AQUARIAS WAS THE PERFECT GUIDE BECAUSE WE BOTH KNEW HE WAS BASICALLY A CON-MAN. THERE WAS NO PRESSURE TO ACT A CERTAIN WAY, I COULD JUST BE MYSELF.

PLUS, YOU'RE THE ONLY THERAPIST I KNOW OF WHO'S ACTUALLY MADE ANOTHER HUMAN BEING FEEL BETTER!

I TOLD HIM THE WHOLE STORY OF MY LIFE, EVEN THE INEXPLICABLE PARTS. HE WAS CERTAIN IT HAD ALL HAPPENED JUST AS I DESCRIBED.

IT'S SIMPLE, MONICA. OCCAM'S RAZOR.

HE BELIEVED MY FATHER WAS A "POLARIAN" (SP.?) AND THAT'S WHY I COULD TALK TO THE DEAD (AND HOW I BECAME SUCCESSFUL, ETC.). IN SOME WEIRD WAY, IT KIND-OF MADE SENSE.

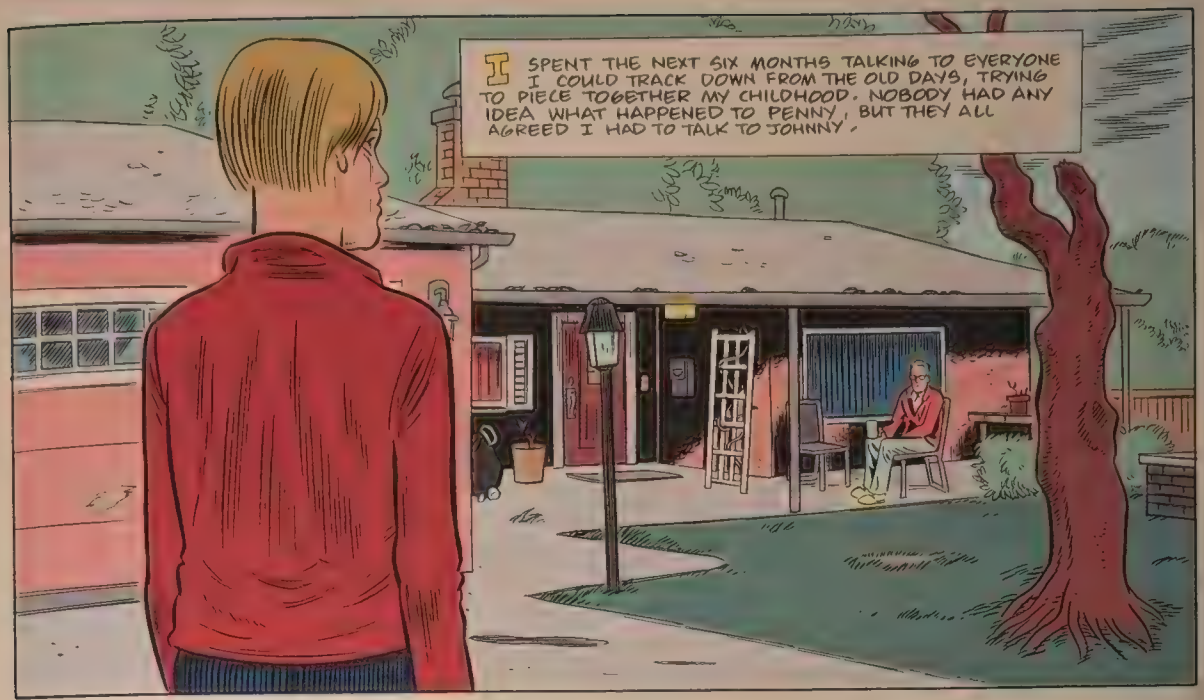
LOOK AT ALL THAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU, ALL YOU'VE DONE. A CANDLE STORE?? COME ON!

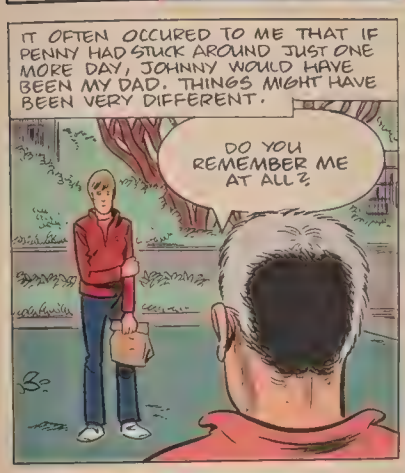
HE KEPT TELLING ME OVER AND OVER HOW LUCKY I WAS.

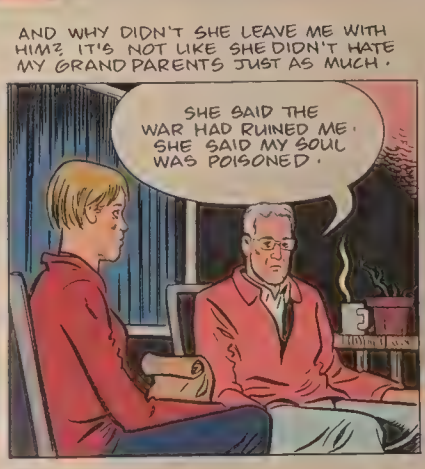
DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? YOU HAVE AN HONEST-TO-GOD CAPITAL-Q QUEST!

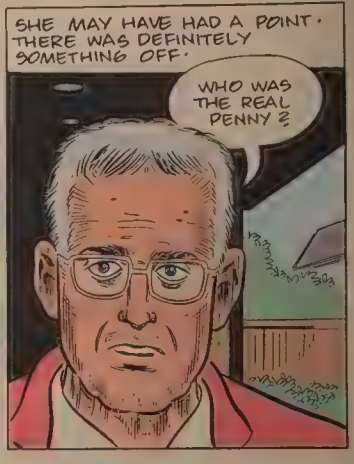
AND SO, AT THE END OF OUR TIME TOGETHER, HE SENT ME OFF, SWORD IN HAND, TO FIND THE ANSWERS THAT WOULD END MY TORMENT.

I WANTED TO ASK ONE LAST THING... THE NAME "MONICA'S CANDLES" - THAT WAS YOUR MOTHER'S STORE, WASN'T IT?

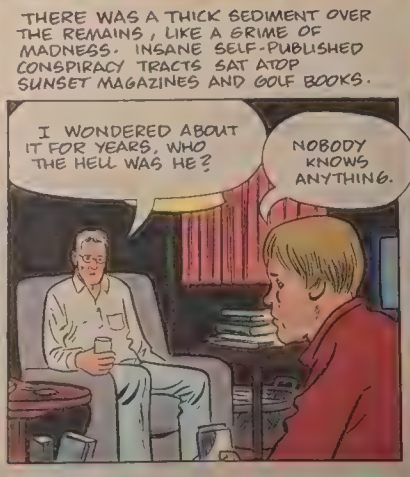

I SPENT THE NEXT SIX MONTHS TALKING TO EVERYONE I COULD TRACK DOWN FROM THE OLD DAYS, TRYING TO PIECE TOGETHER MY CHILDHOOD. NOBODY HAD ANY IDEA WHAT HAPPENED TO PENNY, BUT THEY ALL AGREED I HAD TO TALK TO JOHNNY.


IT OFTEN OCCURED TO ME THAT IF PENNY HAD STUCK AROUND JUST ONE MORE DAY, JOHNNY WOULD HAVE BEEN MY DAD. THINGS MIGHT HAVE BEEN VERY DIFFERENT.
DO YOU REMEMBER ME AT ALL?

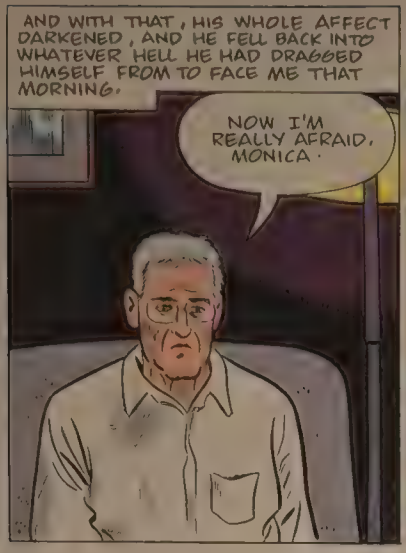

AND WHY DIDN'T SHE LEAVE ME WITH HIM? IT'S NOT LIKE SHE DIDN'T HATE MY GRANDPARENTS JUST AS MUCH.
SHE SAID THE WAR HAD RUINED ME. SHE SAID MY SOUL WAS POISONED.

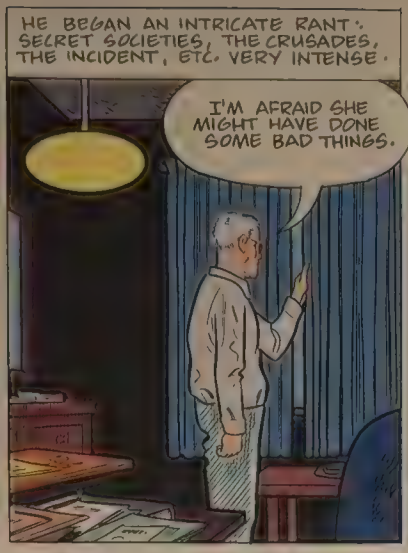

SHE MAY HAVE HAD A POINT. THERE WAS DEFINITELY SOMETHING OFF.
WHO WAS THE REAL PENNY?

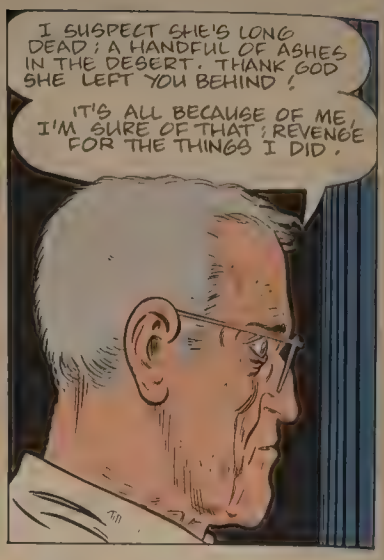
HIS PLACE LOOKED LIKE IT HAD ONCE BEEN A NICE SUBURBAN HOME BEFORE SOMETHING, SOME AWFUL CATASTROPHE, HAD BROUGHT RUIN AND DESPAIR.
DID SHE EVER TALK TO YOU ABOUT MY REAL FATHER?
NEVER.

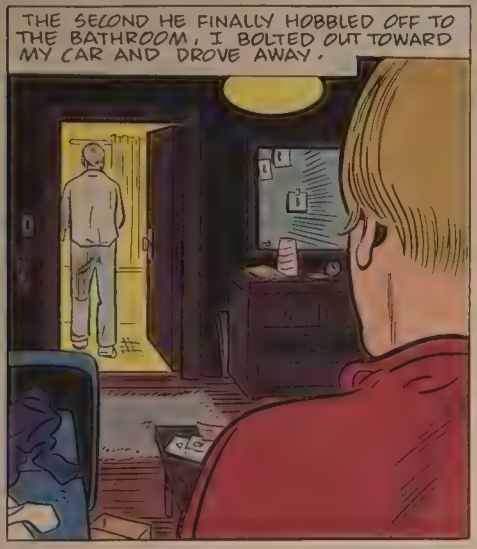

THERE WAS A THICK SEDIMENT OVER THE REMAINS, LIKE A GRIME OF MADNESS. INSANE SELF-PUBLISHED CONSPIRACY TRACTS SAT ATOP SUNSET MAGAZINES AND GOLF BOOKS.
I WONDERED ABOUT IT FOR YEARS, WHO THE HELL WAS HE?
NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING.

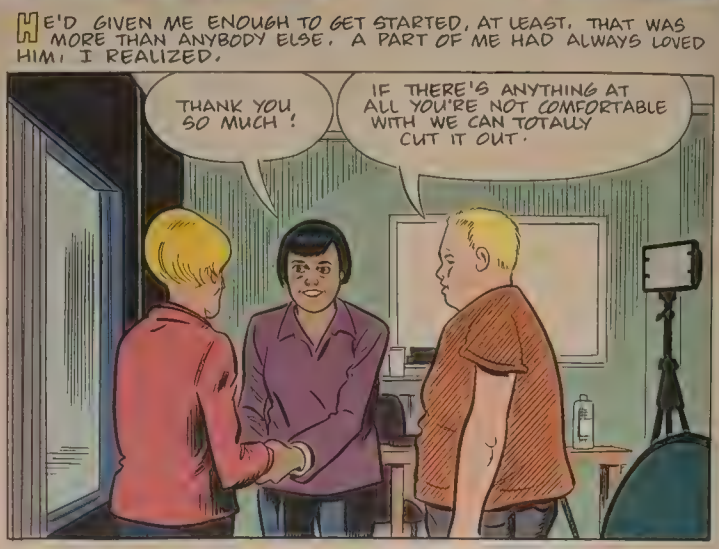
HE HAD A FEW THEORIES, BUT NOTHING THAT MADE MUCH SENSE.
SO, I REMEMBER SHE HAD A PAMPHLET CALLED "THE OPENING." DOES THAT MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?

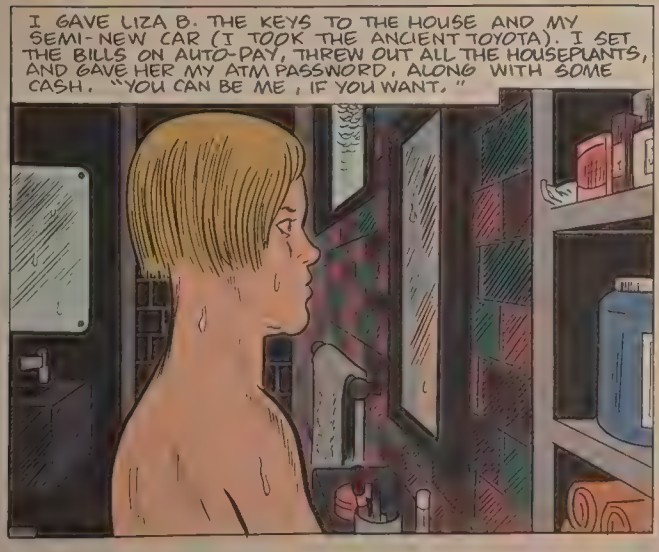

AND WITH THAT, HIS WHOLE AFFECT DARKENED, AND HE FELL BACK INTO WHATEVER HELL HE HAD DRAGGED HIMSELF FROM TO FACE ME THAT MORNING.
NOW I'M REALLY AFRAID, MONICA.


HE BEGAN AN INTRICATE RANT: SECRET SOCIETIES, THE CRUSADES, THE INCIDENT, ETC. VERY INTENSE.
I'M AFRAID SHE MIGHT HAVE DONE SOME BAD THINGS.


I SUSPECT SHE'S LONG DEAD; A HANDFUL OF ASHES IN THE DESERT. THANK GOD SHE LEFT YOU BEHIND!
IT'S ALL BECAUSE OF ME, I'M SURE OF THAT; REVENGE FOR THE THINGS I DID.


THE SECOND HE FINALLY HOBBLED OFF TO THE BATHROOM, I BOLTED OUT TOWARD MY CAR AND DROVE AWAY.

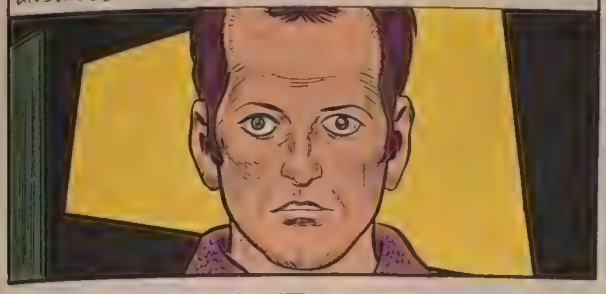

HE'D GIVEN ME ENOUGH TO GET STARTED, AT LEAST. THAT WAS MORE THAN ANYBODY ELSE. A PART OF ME HAD ALWAYS LOVED HIM, I REALIZED.
THANK YOU SO MUCH!
IF THERE'S ANYTHING AT ALL YOU'RE NOT COMFORTABLE WITH WE CAN TOTALLY CUT IT OUT.


I GAVE LIZA B. THE KEYS TO THE HOUSE AND MY SEMI-NEW CAR (I TOOK THE ANCIENT TOYOTA). I SET THE BILLS ON AUTO-PAY, THREW OUT ALL THE HOUSEPLANTS, AND GAVE HER MY ATM PASSWORD, ALONG WITH SOME CASH. "YOU CAN BE ME, IF YOU WANT."

AND THE NEXT THING I KNEW, I WAS DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF A DANGEROUS CULT, ALONE AND TERRIFIED FOR MY LIFE.

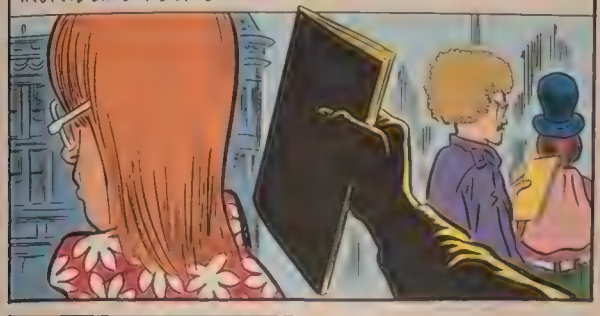
THE OPENING

THE OPENING WAS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE FOUNDED IN 1965 BY **V. LAMONTE FLOWERS**, A.K.A. "THE NAMELESS," "FATHER-BROTHER V.," OR SIMPLY "V." PRIOR TO HIS ENLIGHTENMENT, V. HAD BEEN A NAVY DESERTER, AN EMBEZZLER, A MANN-ACT VIOLATOR, AND AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR, VOCALIST, AND DRAMATURGE.

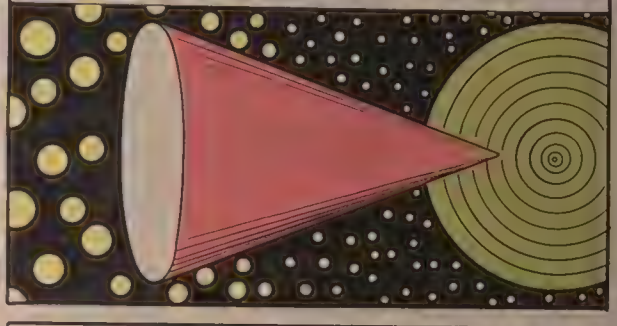


THE EARLIEST KNOWN ASSEMBLY OF HIS FOLLOWERS TOOK PLACE IN MAY, 1967 AT THE **HORN OF PLENTY**, A NATURAL-FOOD CAFÉ THAT HAD BEEN A HAVEN FOR "UTOPIANS, GARGOYLES, BEAUTIFUL DREAMERS, AND FREE RADICALS," ACCORDING TO A MANIFESTO ON THEIR DESSERT MENU.

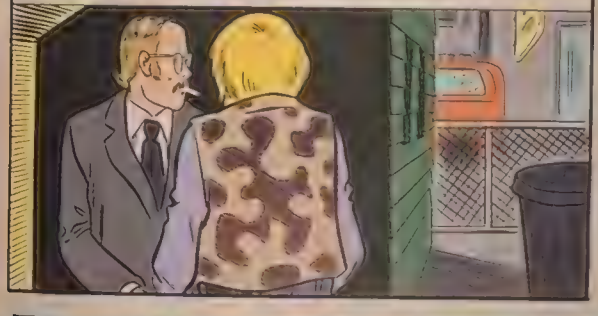
THEIR TINY NUMBER GREW WITH THE PUBLICATION OF A PAMPHLET, *THE OPENING*, WHICH CLARIFIED V.'S CENTRAL PREMISE THAT OUR SHARED REALITY IS A QUASI-DEMONIC FABRICATION DESIGNED TO THWART INDIVIDUAL FULFILLMENT.



FOLLOWING HIS PROGRAM ENABLED THE SEEKER TO "PASS THROUGH THE CONE," WHERE THEY WERE ABLE TO "FULLY EXPERIENCE THE VAST UNIVERSAL WORKINGS BEYOND OUR DELUDED PERCEPTIONS."



THERE WERE ALLEGATIONS OF S.L.A.-STYLE VIOLENCE ATTACHED TO THE GROUP, BUT ACCORDING TO F.O.I.A. DOCS, THEY WERE SEEN BY THE FBI AS LARGELY BENIGN. "A PYRAMID SCHEME BY AND FOR CRACKPOTS... OF HARM ONLY TO THEMSELVES."

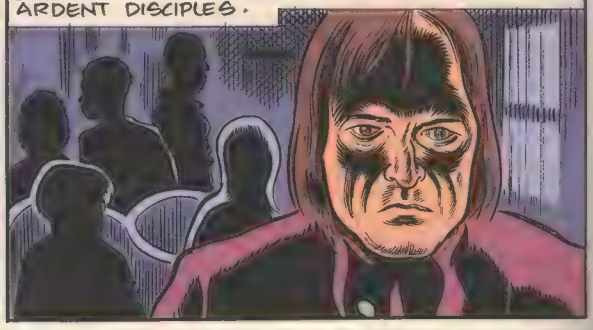


IN 1971, V. WAS STRUCK BY A SERIES OF REVELATORY VISIONS AND WENT INTO SECLUSION TO WRITE A VAST, MULTI-VOLUME "SECOND GOSPEL."

THE WAY

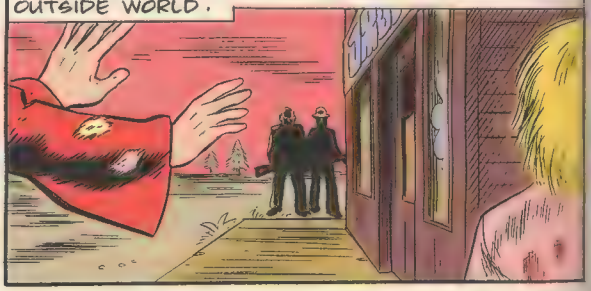
DURING THIS PROLONGED ABSENCE, HIS ONCE-DEVOTED ACOLYTE, JEANNE DAVIES (**MOTHER-SISTER GLENDA**) DECIDED TO BREAK WITH V., STEERING THE PRACTICE TOWARD A PLATFORM OF ENLIGHTENMENT, IN CONTRAST TO V.'S INCREASINGLY DARK VISION OF APOCALYPSE AND SUFFERING.

AFTER A SERIES OF LAWSUITS, GLENDA TOOK CONTROL, FORCING V. TO FORM HIS OWN SPLINTER GROUP, **THE WAY**, MADE UP ONLY OF HIS MOST ARDENT DISCIPLES.

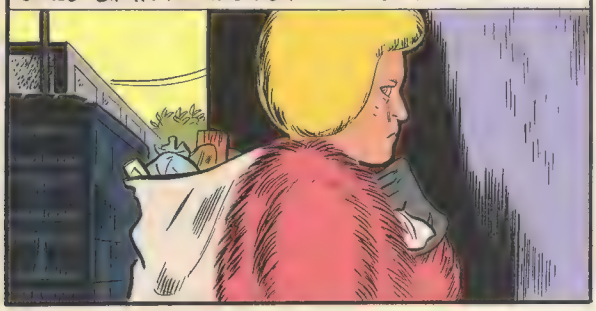


THE OPENING LATER MORPHED INTO THE **OPEN WORLD FORUM**, A SOMEWHAT GENERIC NEW-AGE BRAND THAT CONTINUES TO HOLD SEMINARS THROUGHOUT THE U.S. AND ASIA. V. IS LARGELY ABSENT FROM THEIR HOLY TEXTS, REFERRED TO ONLY AS "ANAMAKA," ("THE NAMELESS").

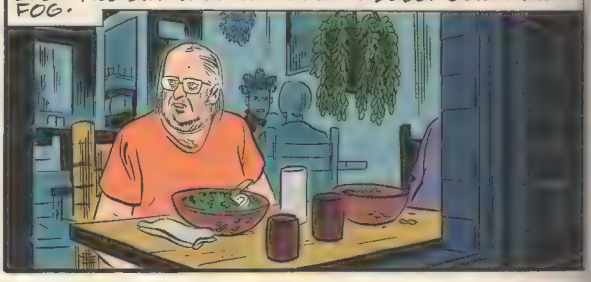
V. TOOK HIS FOLLOWERS TO BOONDALE, CA., AN ABANDONED MINING TOWN, WHERE THEY LIVED UNTIL THEY WERE OUSTED BY LOCAL DEVELOPERS. THEY EVENTUALLY RESETTLED IN THE AREA, KEEPING TO THEMSELVES WITH LITTLE INTEREST FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD.



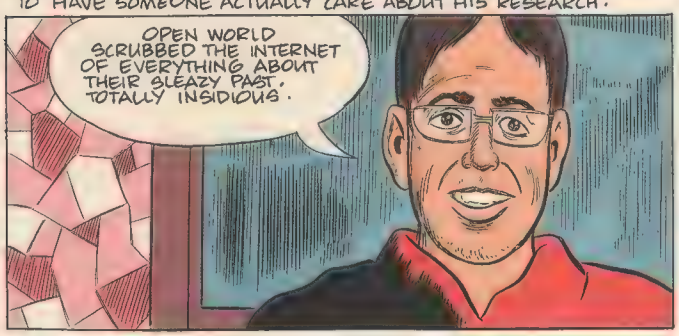
V. IS PRESUMED ALIVE, IN HIS MID-70S, THOUGH THE GROUP IS NOW VERY LIKELY RUN BY HIS SON (**SONNY-BOY**) WHO HAS BEEN GROOMED SINCE BIRTH AS THE HEIR APPARENT.



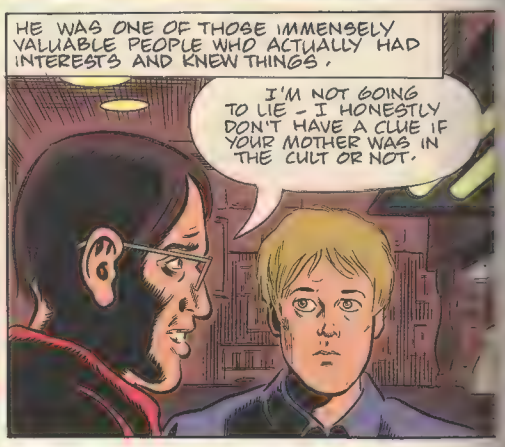
THE HORN OF PLENTY STILL EXISTS, WITH OCCASIONAL SIGHTINGS OF "CARD CARRIERS" (OLD-TIME OPENING MEMBERS WHO LEFT DURING "THE DIVISION"), BUT THE BIZARRE TRUTH ABOUT THE EARLY YEARS OF THIS GLOBAL QUASI-RELIGION HAS BEEN ALL BUT LOST IN A DRUG-ADDLED GERIATRIC FOG.



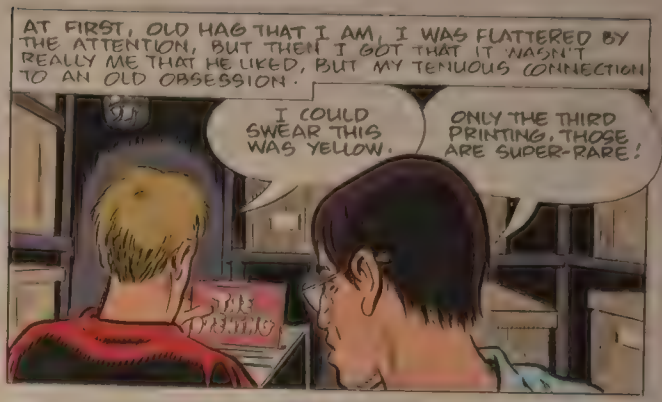
SO ENDS THE ONLY ARTICLE I COULD FIND ONLINE ABOUT THE EARLY DAYS OF THE OPENING, ARCHIVED FROM A NOW-DEFUNCT WEBSITE CALLED SPASMO.COM. IT WAS WRITTEN CIRCA 2008 BY DANTE DIBELLO, AN UNAFFILIATED JOURNALIST WHO WAS EASY ENOUGH TO TRACK DOWN AND SEEMED QUITE THRILLED TO HAVE SOMEONE ACTUALLY CARE ABOUT HIS RESEARCH.



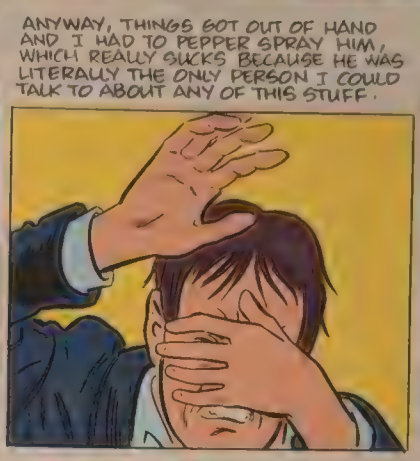
HE WAS ONE OF THOSE IMMENSELY VALUABLE PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY HAD INTERESTS AND KNEW THINGS.

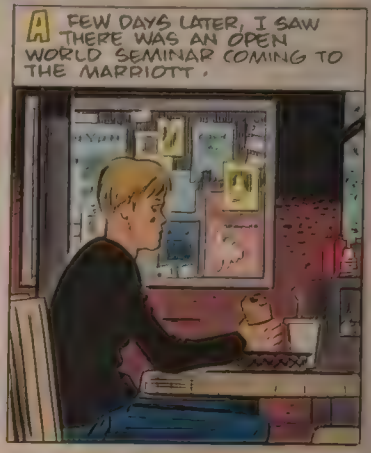


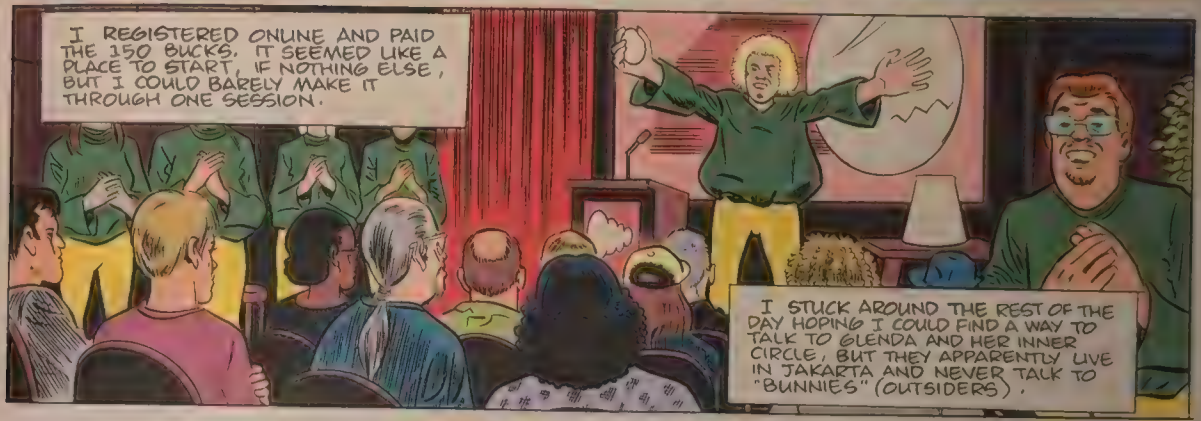
MY STORY SEEMED TO REIGNITE HIS INTEREST IN THE SUBJECT. WE WOUND UP MEETING AGAIN AT HIS STORAGE SPACE SO I COULD DIG THROUGH ALL THE OLD FILES. I GOT THE IDEA HE POSSIBLY HAD A CRUSH ON ME.
THAT COULD BE HER...
NO, THAT'S CRYSTAL STEIN.

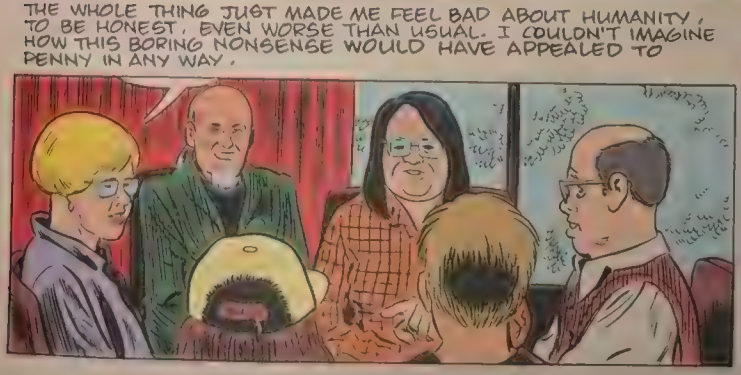

AT FIRST, OLD HAG THAT I AM, I WAS FLATTERED BY THE ATTENTION, BUT THEN I GOT THAT IT WASN'T REALLY ME THAT HE LIKED, BUT MY TENUOUS CONNECTION TO AN OLD OBSESSION.
I COULD SWEAR THIS WAS YELLOW.
ONLY THE THIRD PRINTING. THOSE ARE SUPER-RARE!

ONE NIGHT, HE SHOWED UP AT MY MOTEL ROOM CLAIMING TO HAVE SOME MAJOR NEW INFO, BUT IT TURNED OUT TO BE NOTHING. VERY WEIRD.


ANYWAY, THINGS GOT OUT OF HAND AND I HAD TO PEPPER SPRAY HIM, WHICH REALLY SUCKS BECAUSE HE WAS LITERALLY THE ONLY PERSON I COULD TALK TO ABOUT ANY OF THIS STUFF.


A FEW DAYS LATER, I SAW THERE WAS AN OPEN WORLD SEMINAR COMING TO THE MARRIOTT.

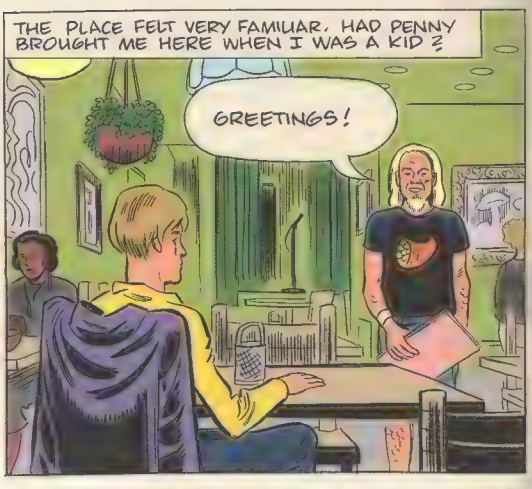

I REGISTERED ONLINE AND PAID THE 150 BUCKS. IT SEEMED LIKE A PLACE TO START, IF NOTHING ELSE, BUT I COULD BARELY MAKE IT THROUGH ONE SESSION.
I STUCK AROUND THE REST OF THE DAY HOPING I COULD FIND A WAY TO TALK TO GLENDA AND HER INNER CIRCLE, BUT THEY APPARENTLY LIVE IN JAKARTA AND NEVER TALK TO "BUNNIES" (OUTSIDERS).

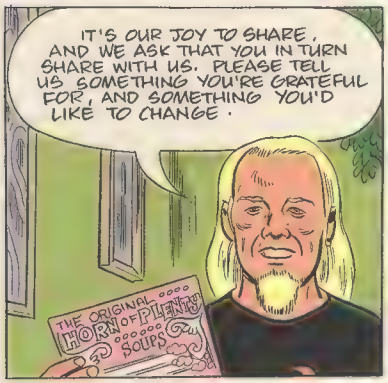

THE WHOLE THING JUST MADE ME FEEL BAD ABOUT HUMANITY, TO BE HONEST. EVEN WORSE THAN USUAL. I COULDN'T IMAGINE HOW THIS BORING NONSENSE WOULD HAVE APPEALED TO PENNY IN ANY WAY.

IT SURE AS HELL WASN'T SOMETHING YOU'D ABANDON YOUR DAUGHTER FOR.

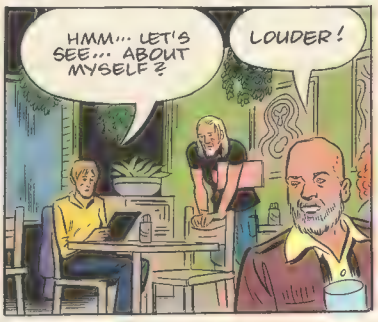
IT LOOKED LIKE MY BEST BET WAS TO START BACK AT THE BEGINNING, SEE IF I COULD MAYBE FIND SOME AGING BEATNIKS WHO REMEMBERED THE OLDEN DAYS.

THE PLACE FELT VERY FAMILIAR. HAD PENNY BROUGHT ME HERE WHEN I WAS A KID?



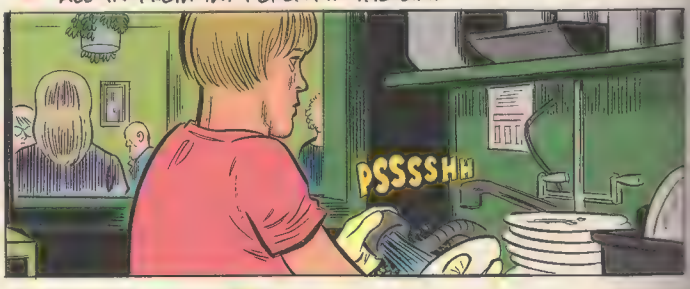

IT'S OUR JOY TO SHARE, AND WE ASK THAT YOU IN TURN SHARE WITH US. PLEASE TELL US SOMETHING YOU'RE GRATEFUL FOR, AND SOMETHING YOU'D LIKE TO CHANGE.
THE ORIGINAL HORN OF PLENTY SOUPS

THIS CREEPY RITUAL WAS A HOLDOVER FROM THE HIPPIE PAST. A POSITIVE SIGN, I THOUGHT.

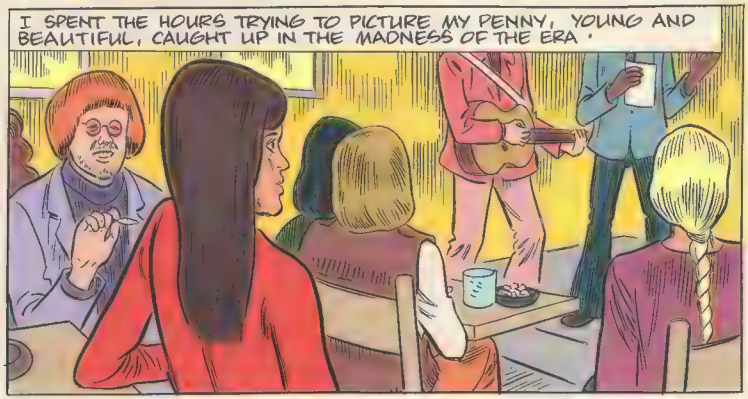


AT THE END OF DINNER, I ASKED ABOUT WORKING THERE AND THEY HIRED ME ON THE SPOT, NO QUESTIONS ASKED.

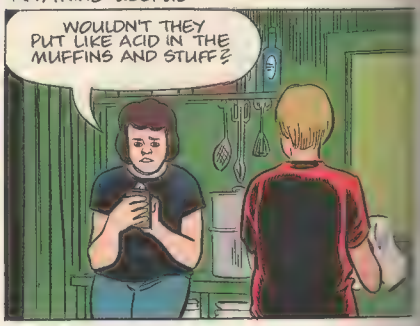
I CAME IN EVERY NIGHT AFTER THAT, QUIETLY TAKING IT ALL IN FROM MY PERCH AT THE SINK.



I SPENT THE HOURS TRYING TO PICTURE MY PENNY, YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL, CAUGHT UP IN THE MADNESS OF THE ERA.



MY CO-WORKERS HAD ALL AT LEAST HEARD OF THE OPENING, BUT THEY WERE TOO YOUNG TO ACTUALLY KNOW ANYTHING USEFUL.



AND SO THE WEEKS PASSED. FOR ALL I KNEW, PENNY HAD NEVER EVEN BEEN HERE IN HER LIFE.

WHAT AM I DOING? I USED TO BE THE HEAD OF A BIG COMPANY...

DSSSH

THAT'S LITERALLY WHAT I WAS THINKING THAT NIGHT WHEN TAMRYN CAME STORMING INTO THE KITCHEN.

FUCKING CARD-CARRIERS TRYING TO SCAM A DISCOUNT - CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

PSS

IT TURNS OUT THERE WAS AN ACTUAL CARD GIVEN TO PRE-1975 EMPLOYEES FOR A LIFETIME DISCOUNT. I TOLD HER TO SETTLE DOWN, I'D DEAL WITH IT.

IT WAS "LEON," THE GUY IN THE PICTURE FROM DANTE'S ARTICLE. I DIDN'T RECOGNIZE THE WOMAN, BUT SHE TURNED OUT TO BE HIS WIFE (SISTER?), MIRIAM.

I TOLD HIM NOT TO USE THAT CARD. GODDAMN CHEAPSKATE!

I TRIED TO COME OFF LIKE I WAS JUST A FRIENDLY EMPLOYEE, MAKING SMALL TALK ABOUT THE OLD DAYS, BUT IT DIDN'T EXACTLY GO AS PLANNED.

SO, WERE YOU TWO AROUND BACK WHEN THE OPENING WAS GOING ON?

NO COMMENT!

WE'VE BEEN HARRASSED ENOUGH! YOU TELL GLENDA TO GO FUCK HERSELF!

NO, NO, I'M NOT WITH THE FORUM OR ANYTHING... GOD, NO, I JUST...

I DECIDED TO TELL THEM A SEMI-TRUE (ISH) VERSION OF MY STORY, ABOUT HOW I WAS TRYING TO FIND MY MOTHER.

DO EITHER OF YOU BY ANY CHANCE REMEMBER THIS WOMAN?

HER NAME WAS PENNY...

NO, DEAR.

I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF SHE WAS ACTUALLY-

BULLSHIT! PENNY DIDN'T HAVE ANY KIDS!

I FELT AN ELECTRIC JOLT IN MY BRAIN, LIKE I WAS HAVING A SEIZURE.

WAIT-

HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT HE'S SAYING, DEAR. WE DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR MOTHER.

SHE GRABBED HIS ARM AND THEY SPEED-HOBBLED TOWARD THE DOOR. I STARTED MANIACALLY SPEWING OUT ALL MY QUESTIONS, DESPERATE FOR ANY SHRED OF INFO BEFORE THEY ESCAPED.

WHERE IS SHE NO IS SHE PART OF THE WAY? CAN YOU JUST TELL ME IF

I WAS UP ALL THAT NIGHT, MY HEAD LITERALLY BUZZING. I TRIED CALLING DANTE, BUT HE BLOCKED MY NUMBER.

HAD PENNY ACTUALLY BEEN IN THE CULT?

AND IF SO, WHICH ONE?

I HAD NO WAY TO GET IN TOUCH WITH LEON AND HIS LADYFRIEND, SO I JUST KEPT HANGING AROUND WORK, HOPING FOR ANOTHER BREAK.

ONE NIGHT, I STAYED WAY PAST MY SHIFT. I WAS IN A HORRIBLE MOOD, FEELING STUCK AND HOPELESS. ON MY WAY HOME, I NOTICED SOMEONE WAS FOLLOWING ME.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I WOULD HAVE BEEN TERRIFIED, BUT THAT'S ONE THING ABOUT BEING A MATURE ADULT - YOU DON'T PUT UP WITH THIS KIND OF SHIT. I TURNED ON THE MINI-FLASHLIGHT ON MY KEY-CHAIN AND SHINED IT IN HIS FACE.

WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?

ARE YOU PENNY'S KID?

I KNEW WHO IT WAS IMMEDIATELY, EVEN THOUGH I'D ONLY SEEN HIM ONCE WHEN I WAS FIVE OR SIX YEARS OLD.

D-DO YOU KNOW IF ALICE IS STILL ALIVE?

LEON AND MIRIAM SAID YOU KNEW ABOUT THE WAY... IS ALICE STILL THERE?

IT TOOK A WHILE TO PIECE TOGETHER HIS STORY. VERY BASICALLY, HIS WIFE EVA HAD LEFT FORTY YEARS AGO TO JOIN THE WAY, TAKING THEIR LITTLE DAUGHTER ALICE WITH HER.

I NEVER SAW THEM AGAIN. NOT ONCE.

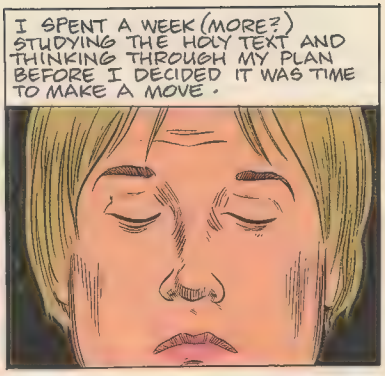
HE SAID HE GOT A CALL HE THINKS WAS FROM ALICE ABOUT 15 YEARS AGO, TELLING HIM EVA WAS DEAD, BUT NOTHING AFTER THAT. HE HADN'T SEEN PENNY SINCE THE BIG SPLIT, BUT HE WAS PRETTY CERTAIN SHE HAD INDEED JOINED THE WAY.

V. HAD A REAL THING FOR HER.

I TOLD HIM I WAS GOING TO FIND HER, AND ASKED WHY HE HADN'T GONE THERE HIMSELF. HE JUST SHOOK HIS HEAD, STARING AT THE GROUND.

BEFORE HE LEFT, HE HANDED ME A PAPER BAG.
JUST PROMISE ME, IF YOU DO SEE ALICE, YOU TELL HER DADDY STILL LOVES HER, OKAY?

I WAITED UNTIL I GOT HOME TO LOOK IN THE BAG. IT WAS A SINGLE-SPACED HAND-TYPED COPY OF THE SECOND GOSPEL, WITH A POST-IT: "FROM EVA'S STORAGE. YOU COULD BE KILLED FOR EVEN LOOKING AT THIS."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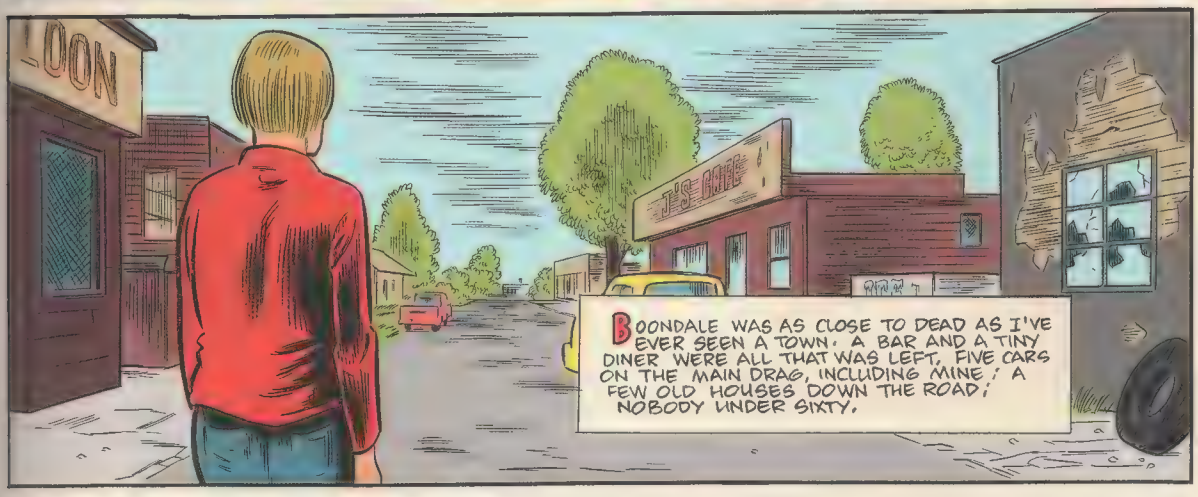
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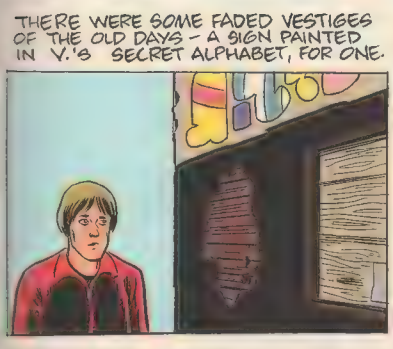
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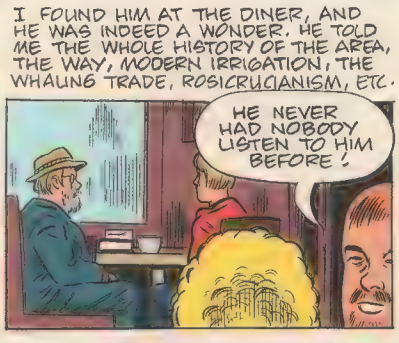
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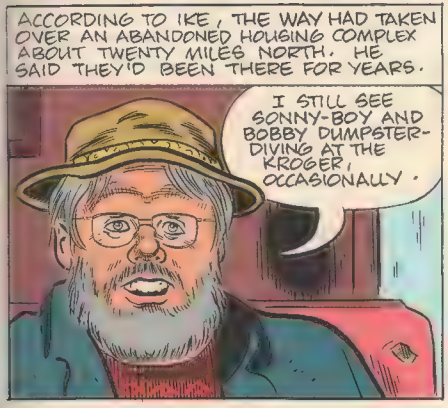
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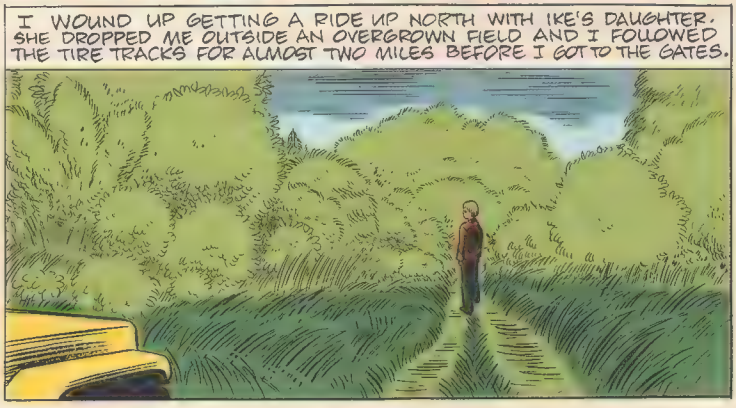
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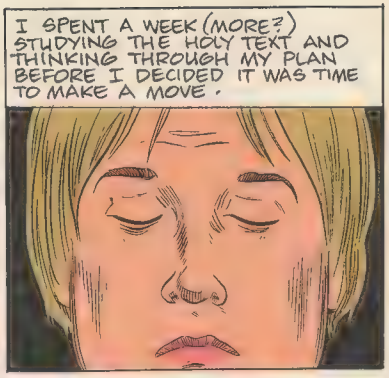
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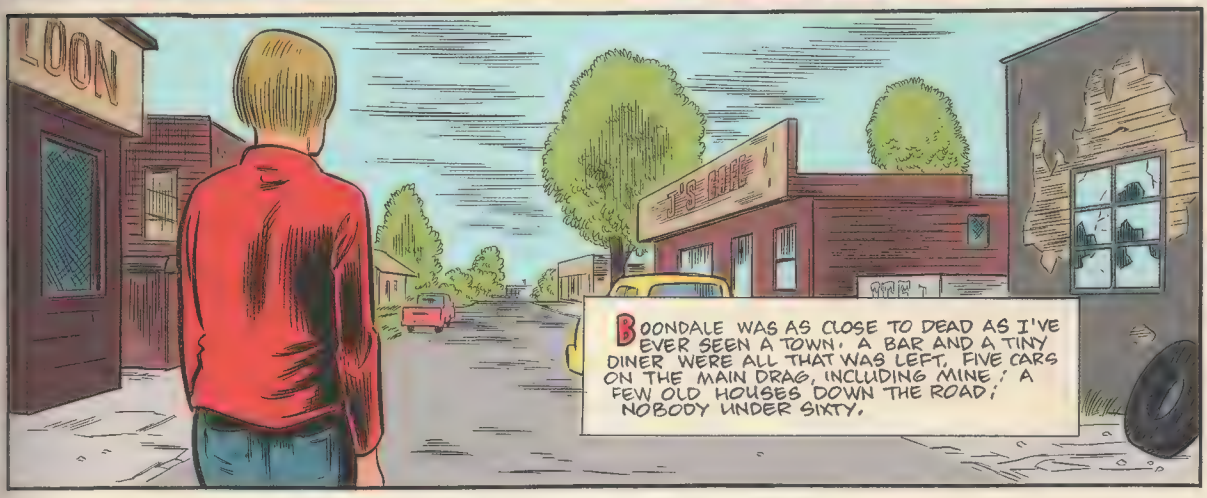
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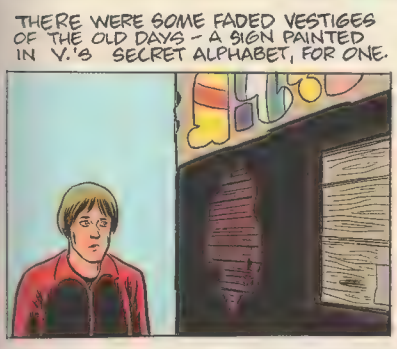
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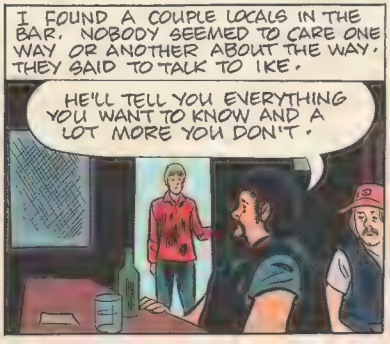
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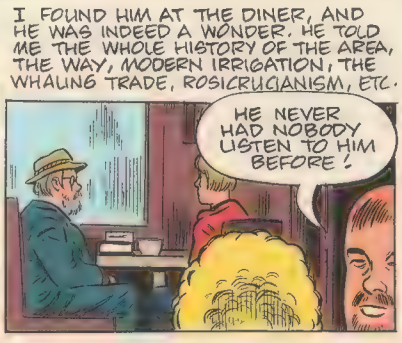
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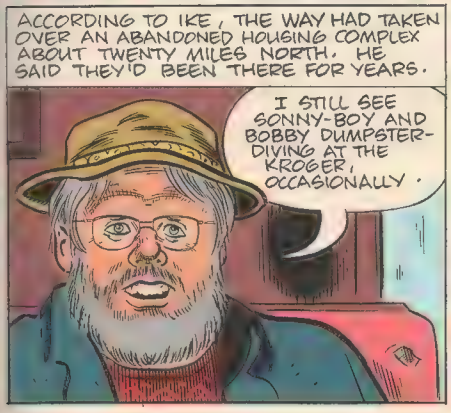
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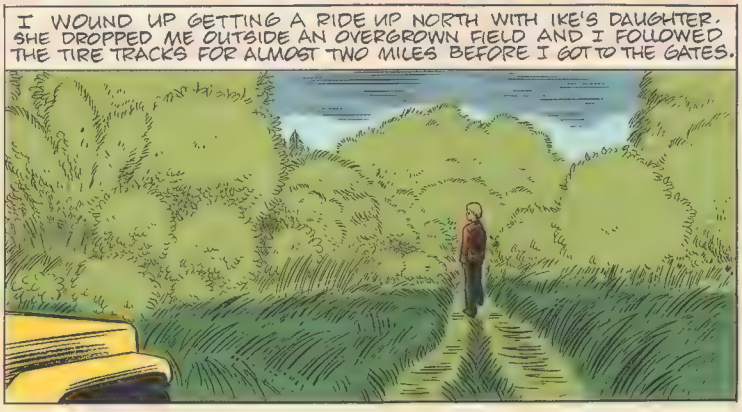
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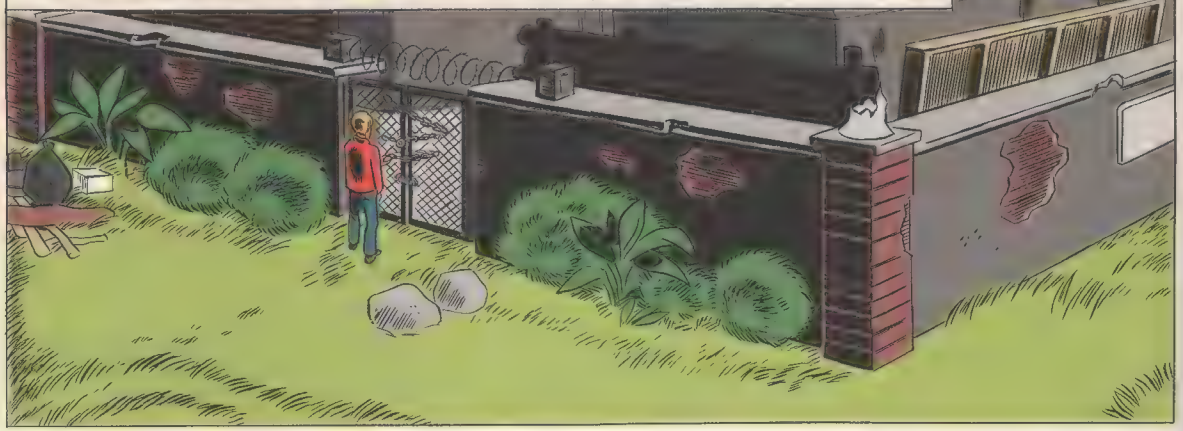

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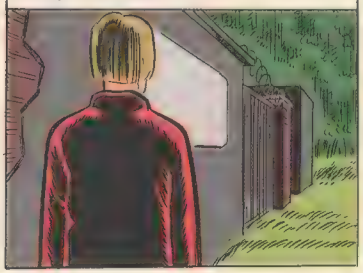
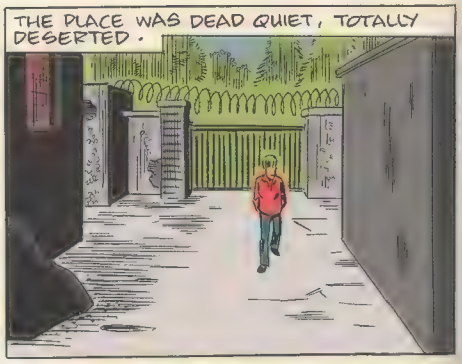
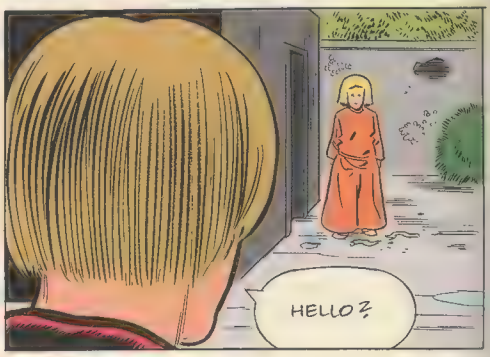


I WONDERED IF I SHOULD TRY TO CLIMB THE WALL, OR YELL, OR JUST WAIT AROUND UNTIL SOMEBODY CAME OUT, BUT WHEN I PUSHED THE GATE, IT SWUNG OPEN.

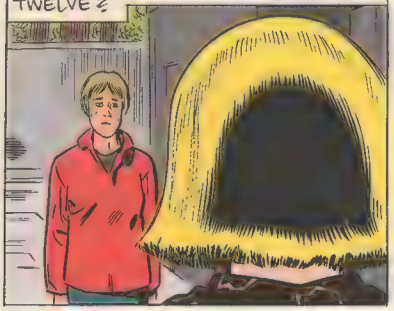
THE PLACE WAS DEAD QUIET, TOTALLY DESERTED.

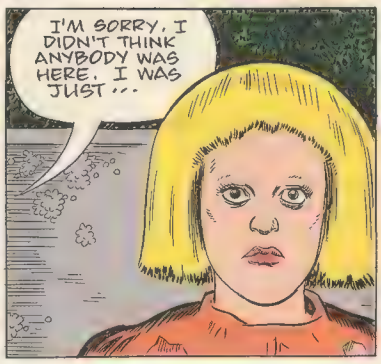


HAD THEY MOVED ON? DISBANDED? WOULD I COME UPON AN AIRTIGHT ROOM FILLED WITH DEAD BODIES?



SHE LOOKED TO BE AROUND TWENTY, BUT IT WAS HARD TO TELL. FORTY? TWELVE?





I HEARD STOMPING, A HEAVY GRUNT, AND THEN ALL WENT BLACK. A FILTHY PLASTIC GARBAGE BAG COVERED MY HEAD AND I WAS CARRIED AWAY WITHOUT RESISTANCE.

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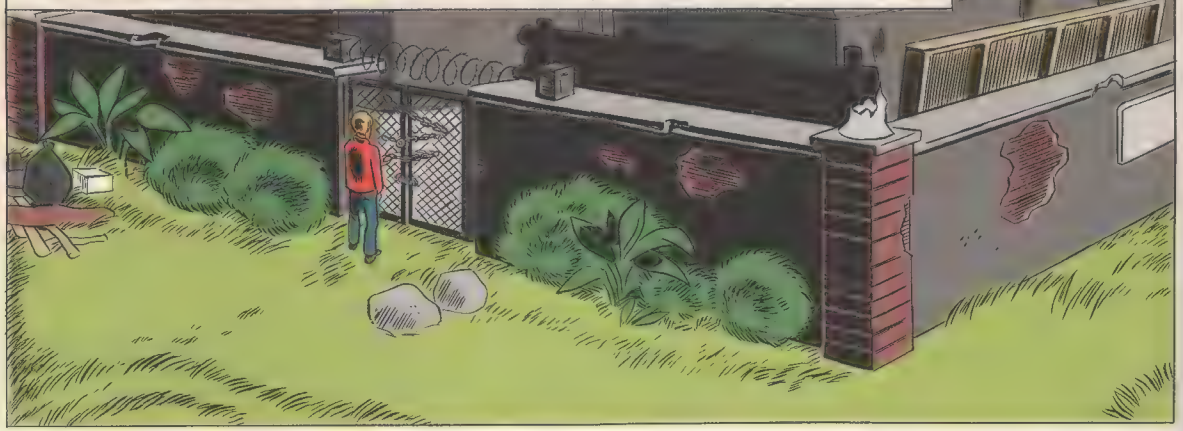
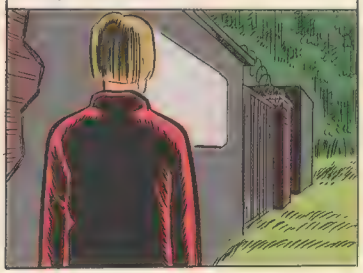
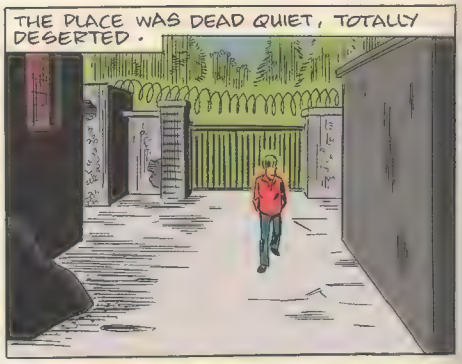


THEY APPARENTLY HAD A CAR AND DID IN FACT LEAVE THE COMPOUND, THOUGH NOT VERY OFTEN, JUDGING FROM THE TIRE TRACKS.

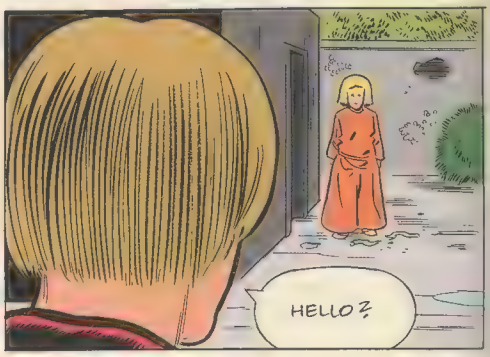


I WONDERED IF I SHOULD TRY TO CLIMB THE WALL, OR YELL, OR JUST WAIT AROUND UNTIL SOMEBODY CAME OUT, BUT WHEN I PUSHED THE GATE, IT SWUNG OPEN.

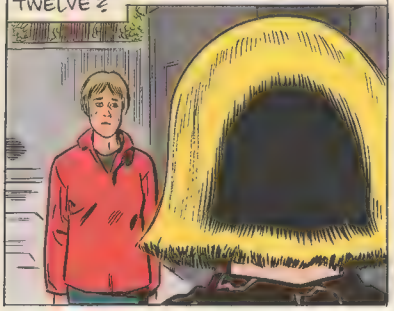
THE PLACE WAS DEAD QUIET, TOTALLY DESERTED.

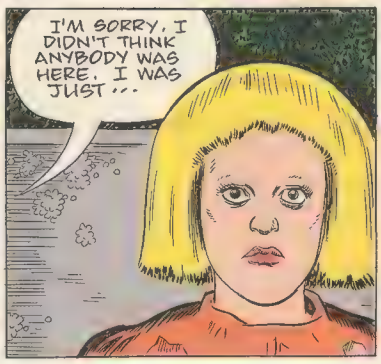


HAD THEY MOVED ON? DISBANDED? WOULD I COME UPON AN AIRTIGHT ROOM FILLED WITH DEAD BODIES?



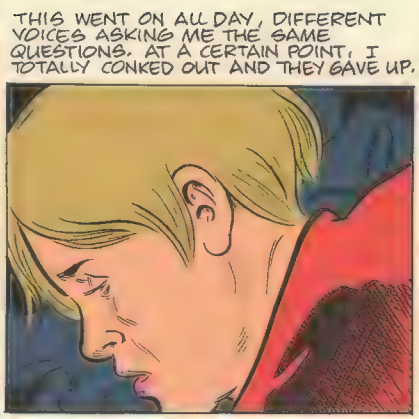
SHE LOOKED TO BE AROUND TWENTY, BUT IT WAS HARD TO TELL. FORTY? TWELVE?

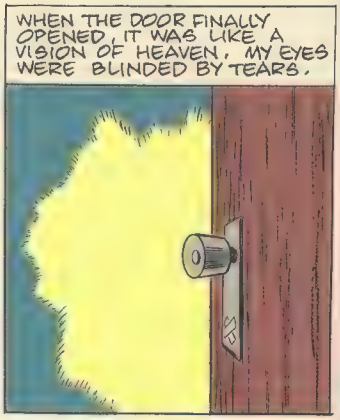


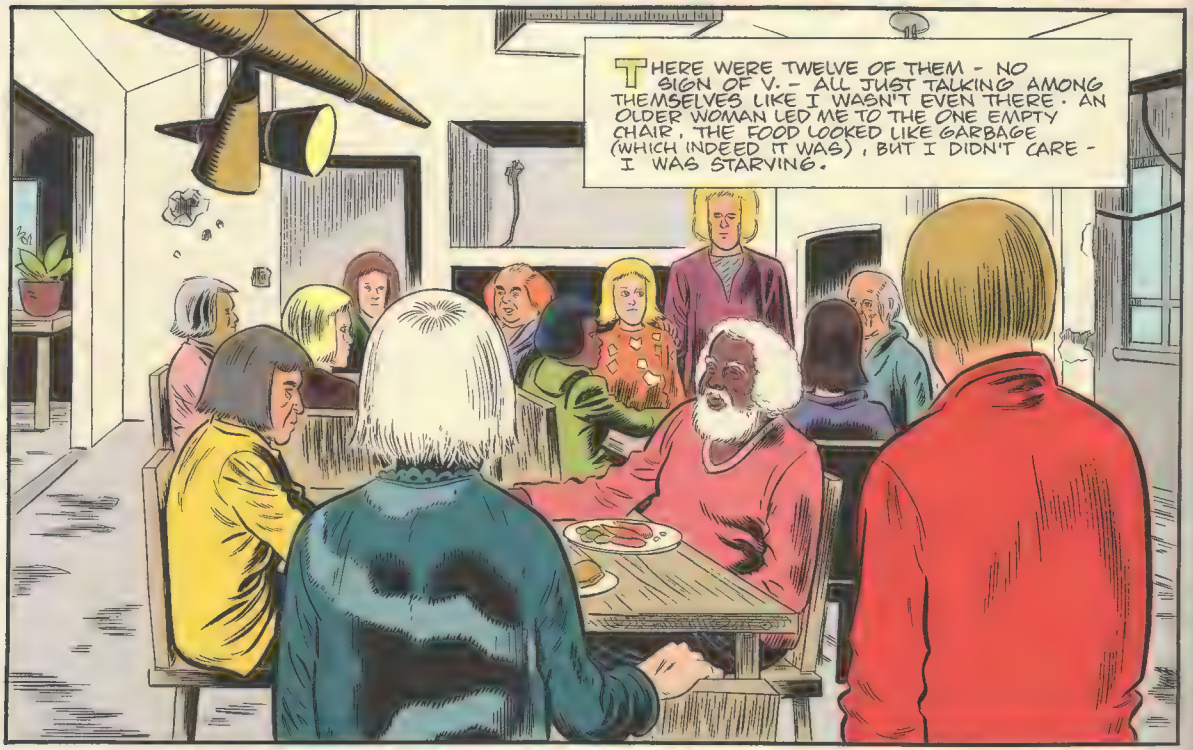


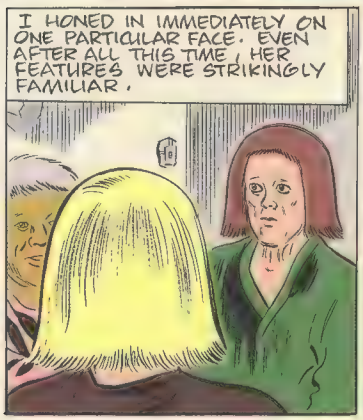
I HEARD STOMPING, A HEAVY GRUNT, AND THEN ALL WENT BLACK. A FILTHY PLASTIC GARBAGE BAG COVERED MY HEAD AND I WAS CARRIED AWAY WITHOUT RESISTANCE.

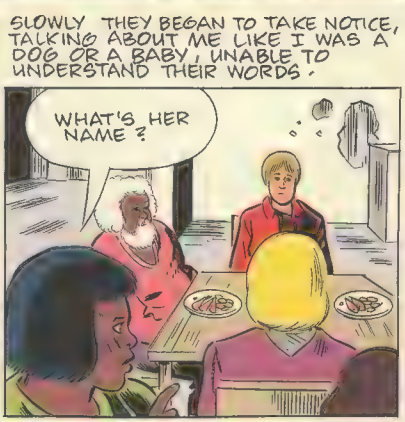
IT WAS A DIFFERENT VOICE, A MAN.
TO LEARN ABOUT THE WAY.

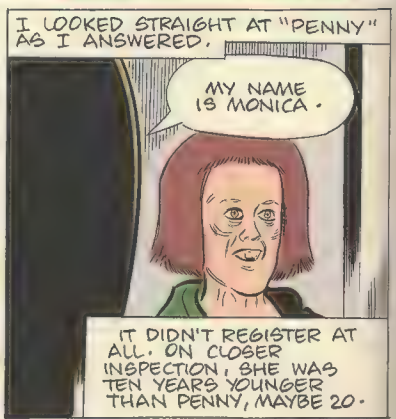

THIS WENT ON ALL DAY, DIFFERENT VOICES ASKING ME THE SAME QUESTIONS. AT A CERTAIN POINT, I TOTALLY CONKED OUT AND THEY GAVE UP.

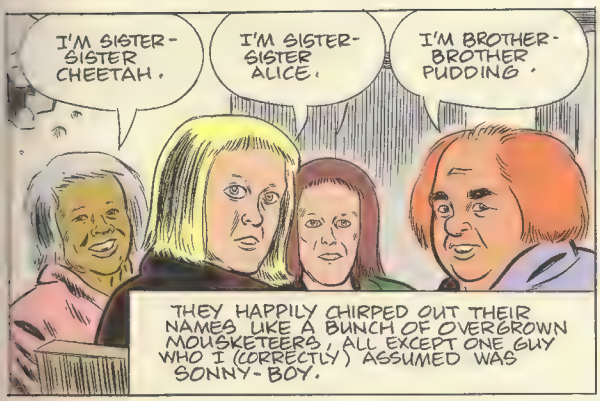

WHEN THE DOOR FINALLY OPENED, IT WAS LIKE A VISION OF HEAVEN. MY EYES WERE BLINDED BY TEARS.

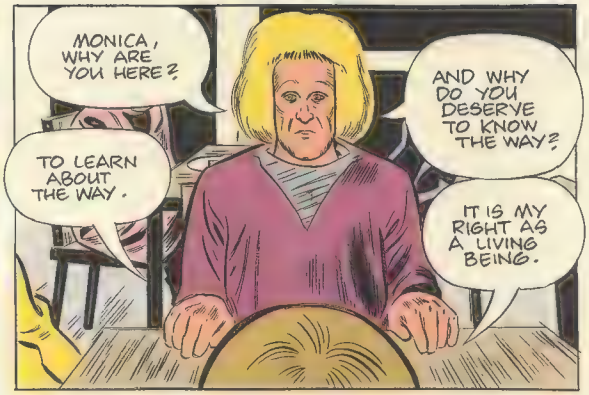

THERE WERE TWELVE OF THEM - NO SIGN OF V. - ALL JUST TALKING AMONG THEMSELVES LIKE I WASN'T EVEN THERE. AN OLDER WOMAN LED ME TO THE ONE EMPTY CHAIR. THE FOOD LOOKED LIKE GARBAGE (WHICH INDEED IT WAS), BUT I DIDN'T CARE - I WAS STARVING.

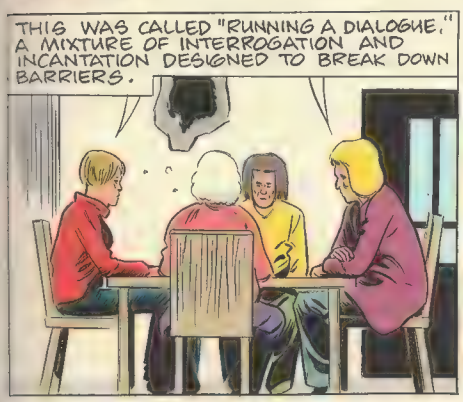

I HONED IN IMMEDIATELY ON ONE PARTICULAR FACE. EVEN AFTER ALL THIS TIME, HER FEATURES WERE STRIKINGLY FAMILIAR.

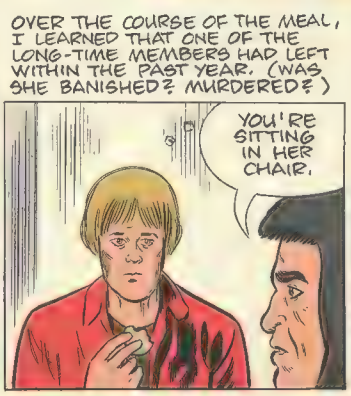

SLOWLY THEY BEGAN TO TAKE NOTICE, TALKING ABOUT ME LIKE I WAS A DOG OR A BABY, UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND THEIR WORDS.
WHAT'S HER NAME?


I LOOKED STRAIGHT AT "PENNY" AS I ANSWERED.
MY NAME IS MONICA.
IT DIDN'T REGISTER AT ALL. ON CLOSER INSPECTION, SHE WAS TEN YEARS YOUNGER THAN PENNY, MAYBE 20.

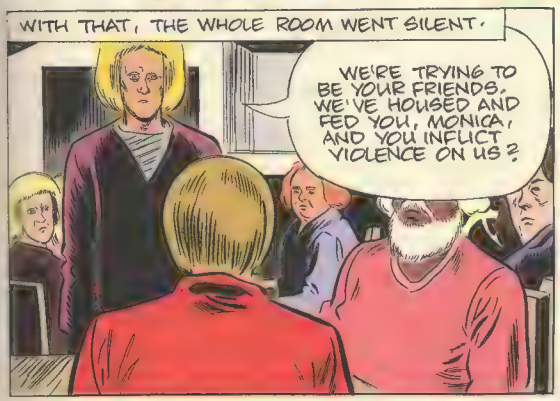

I'M SISTER-SISTER CHEETAH.
I'M SISTER-SISTER ALICE.
I'M BROTHER-BROTHER PUDDING.
THEY HAPPILY CHIRPED OUT THEIR NAMES LIKE A BUNCH OF OVERGROWN MOUSKETEERS, ALL EXCEPT ONE GUY WHO I (CORRECTLY) ASSUMED WAS SONNY-BOY.

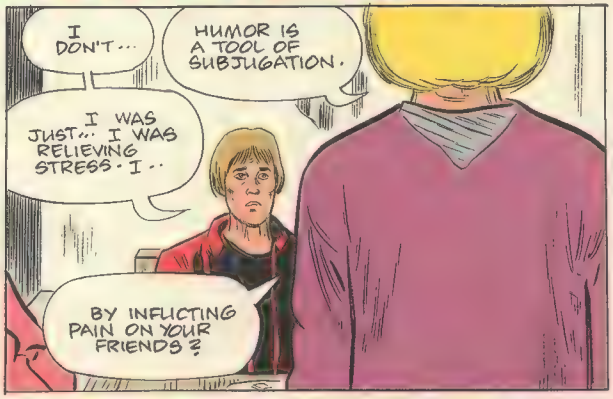

MONICA, WHY ARE YOU HERE?
TO LEARN ABOUT THE WAY.
AND WHY DO YOU DESERVE TO KNOW THE WAY?
IT IS MY RIGHT AS A LIVING BEING.

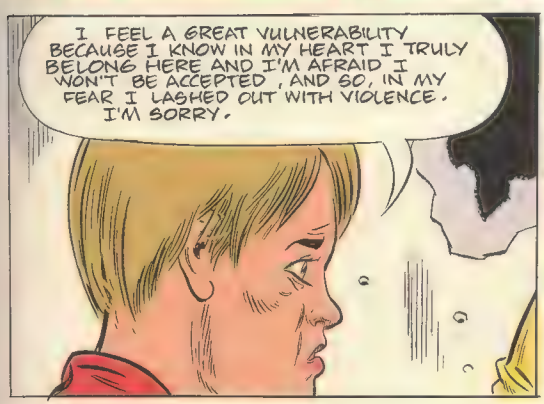

THIS WAS CALLED "RUNNING A DIALOGUE," A MIXTURE OF INTERROGATION AND INCANTATION DESIGNED TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS.

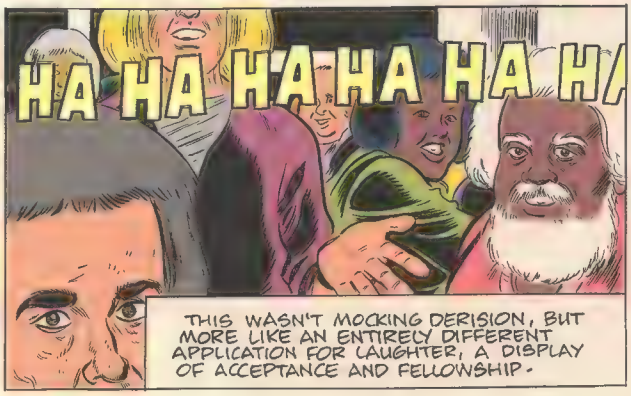

OVER THE COURSE OF THE MEAL, I LEARNED THAT ONE OF THE LONG-TIME MEMBERS HAD LEFT WITHIN THE PAST YEAR. (WAS SHE BANISHED? MURDERED?)
YOU'RE SITTING IN HER CHAIR.

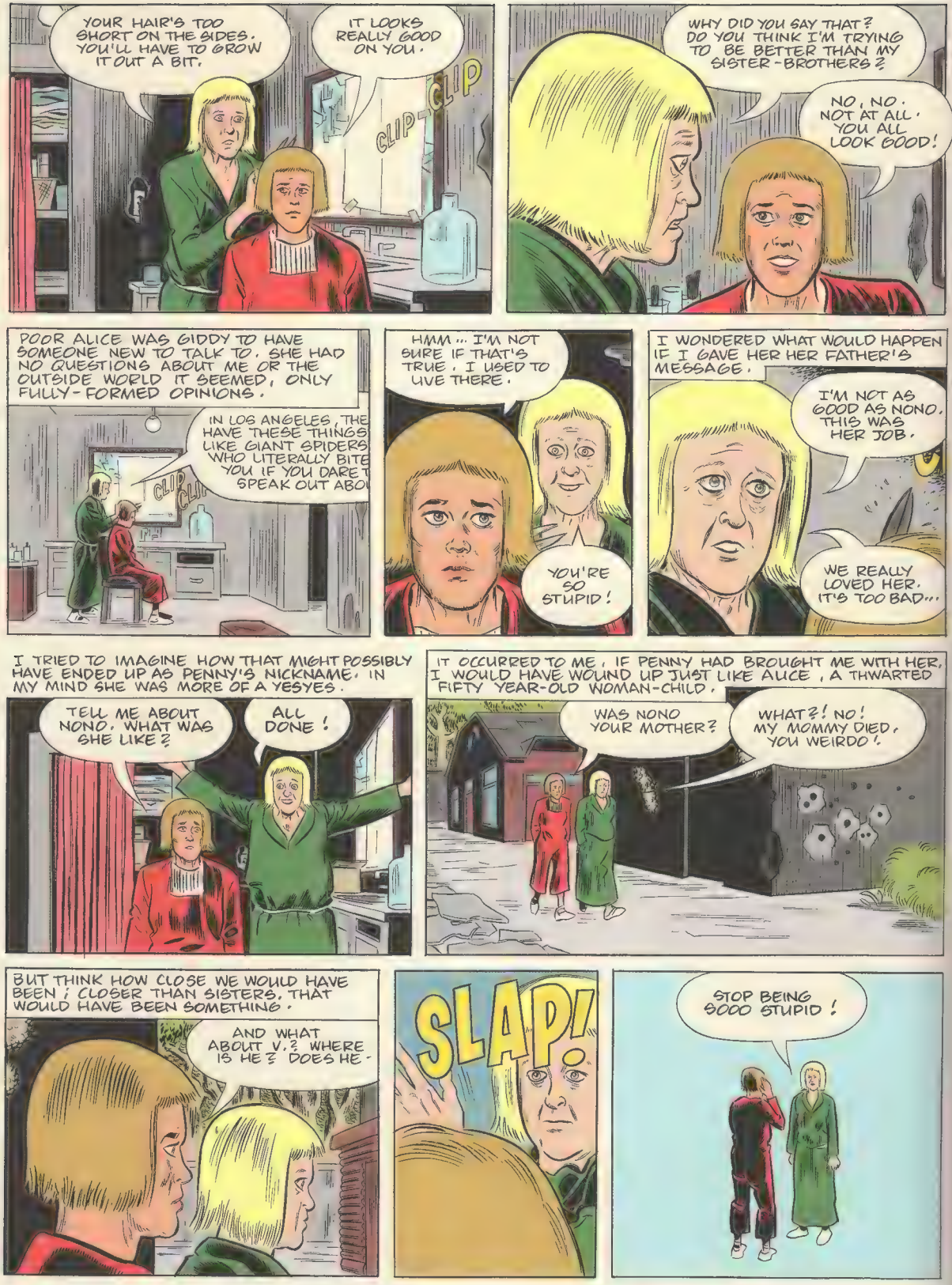
COULD THIS LOST SHEEP BE THE ONE I WAS LOOKING FOR?
I GUESS IT GIVES A WHOLE NEW MEANING TO "OUT OF THE WAY."


WITH THAT, THE WHOLE ROOM WENT SILENT.
WE'RE TRYING TO BE YOUR FRIENDS. WE'VE HOUSED AND FED YOU, MONICA, AND YOU INFLICT VIOLENCE ON US?


I DON'T...
HUMOR IS A TOOL OF SUBJUGATION.
I WAS JUST... I WAS RELIEVING STRESS. I..
BY INFLICTING PAIN ON YOUR FRIENDS?

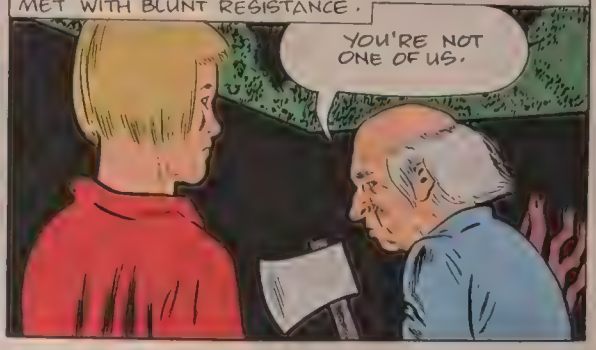

I FEEL A GREAT VULNERABILITY BECAUSE I KNOW IN MY HEART I TRULY BELONG HERE AND I'M AFRAID I WON'T BE ACCEPTED, AND SO, IN MY FEAR I LASHED OUT WITH VIOLENCE. I'M SORRY.


HA HA HA HA HA HA
THIS WASN'T MOCKING DERISION, BUT MORE LIKE AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT APPLICATION FOR LAUGHTER, A DISPLAY OF ACCEPTANCE AND FELLOWSHIP.

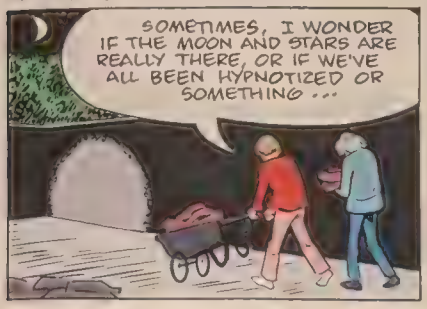

YOUR HAIR'S TOO SHORT ON THE SIDES. YOU'LL HAVE TO GROW IT OUT A BIT.
IT LOOKS REALLY GOOD ON YOU.
CLIP-CLIP
WHY DID YOU SAY THAT? DO YOU THINK I'M TRYING TO BE BETTER THAN MY SISTER-BROTHERS?
NO, NO. NOT AT ALL. YOU ALL LOOK GOOD!
POOR ALICE WAS GIDDY TO HAVE SOMEONE NEW TO TALK TO. SHE HAD NO QUESTIONS ABOUT ME OR THE OUTSIDE WORLD IT SEEMED, ONLY FULLY-FORMED OPINIONS.
IN LOS ANGELES, THE HAVE THESE THINGS LIKE GIANT SPIDERS WHO LITERALLY BITE YOU IF YOU DARE T SPEAK OUT ABO
CLIP
HMM... I'M NOT SURE IF THAT'S TRUE. I USED TO LIVE THERE.
YOU'RE SO STUPID!
I WONDERED WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I GAVE HER HER FATHER'S MESSAGE.
I'M NOT AS GOOD AS NONO. THIS WAS HER JOB.
WE REALLY LOVED HER. IT'S TOO BAD...
I TRIED TO IMAGINE HOW THAT MIGHT POSSIBLY HAVE ENDED UP AS PENNY'S NICKNAME. IN MY MIND SHE WAS MORE OF A YESYES.
TELL ME ABOUT NONO. WHAT WAS SHE LIKE?
ALL DONE!
IT OCCURRED TO ME, IF PENNY HAD BROUGHT ME WITH HER, I WOULD HAVE WOUND UP JUST LIKE ALICE, A THWARTED FIFTY YEAR-OLD WOMAN-CHILD.
WAS NONO YOUR MOTHER?
WHAT?! NO! MY MOMMY DIED, YOU WEIRDO!
BUT THINK HOW CLOSE WE WOULD HAVE BEEN; CLOSER THAN SISTERS, THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN SOMETHING.
AND WHAT ABOUT V.? WHERE IS HE? DOES HE-
SLAP!
STOP BEING SOOO STUPID!

OUR DAYS WERE FILLED WITH MUNDANE HOUSEHOLD TASKS AND RELIGIOUS STUDY. THERE WAS NO TV OR RADIO AND NOBODY LEFT THE PROPERTY EXCEPT SONNY AND BOBBY, AND THEN ONLY TO GET FOOD.

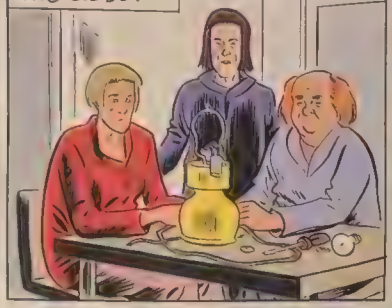
QQ WAS THE ELDEST OF THE GROUP. HE SURELY KNEW ALL ABOUT PENNY, BUT ANY ATTEMPT TO STEER THE CONVERSATION TO THE OLD DAYS WAS MET WITH BLUNT RESISTANCE.



I TRIED - VERY SUBTLY - TO WORK IN SOME OF WHAT I'D READ IN THE SECOND GOSPEL, HOPING IT MIGHT MAKE ME SEEM MORE SPECIAL, WORTHY OF THEIR TRUST.



A FEW DAYS LATER, I WAS IN THE MAIN HOUSE REWIRING A LAMP WITH PUDDING WHEN BOBBY TOLD ME I HAD TO GO BACK IN THE CLOSET.

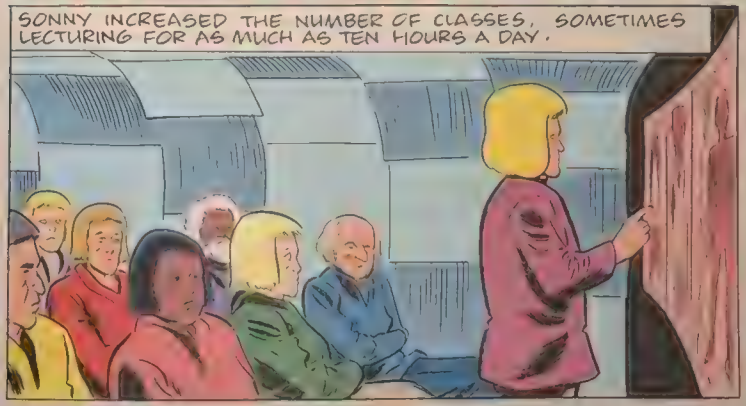


OUTSIDE, I HEARD HUSHED VOICES AND THEN AN UNFAMILIAR BARITONE. I ALMOST HAD A PANIC ATTACK WHEN I REALIZED WHO IT WAS.

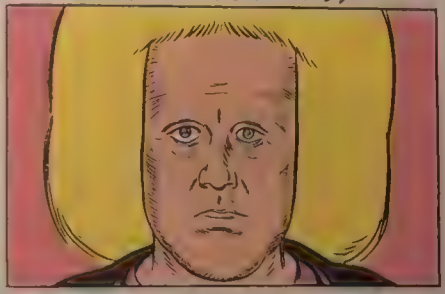
I WANTED TO SCREAM OUT, TELL HIM MY SECRET, BUT I WAS AFRAID THEY'D SEND ME AWAY (OR MUCH WORSE).

AFTER HE LEFT, THERE WAS A VERY DIFFERENT MOOD AROUND THE ESTATES, A SORT OF NERVOUS EXCITEMENT.

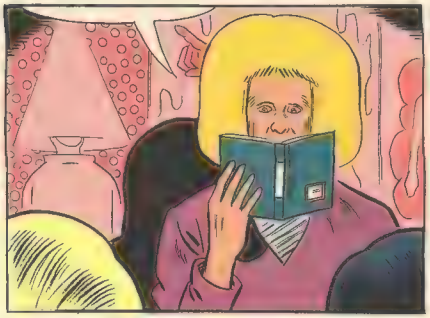
SONNY INCREASED THE NUMBER OF CLASSES, SOMETIMES LECTURING FOR AS MUCH AS TEN HOURS A DAY.



I TRIED TO PICTURE HIS REACTION WHEN HE LEARNED HE WAS MY HALF-BROTHER (OR MAYBE EVEN MORE THAN THAT? WAS PENNY HIS MOTHER, TOO? WAS I RELATED TO EVERYBODY IN THE ROOM?).

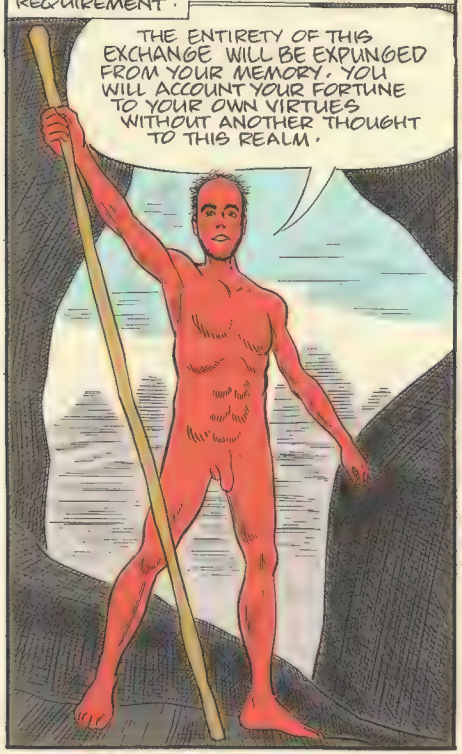


THE FOUNDATION OF V.'S GOSPEL IS "THE PRIMAL EXCHANGE," WHICH POSITS THAT AN ANCIENT RACE CONTROLS ALL HUMAN DESTINY.

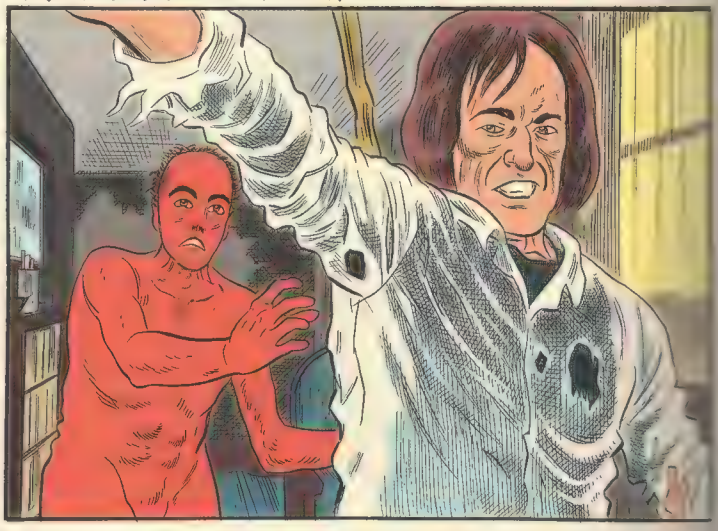


IN HIS TELLING, SELECT "AURORAE" (ADVANTAGED SOULS) ARE VISITED BY A DEITY CALLED LUX (NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE DISH SOAP), WHO GRANTS THEM SPECIAL ATTRIBUTES: WEALTH, POWER, BEAUTY, FAME.

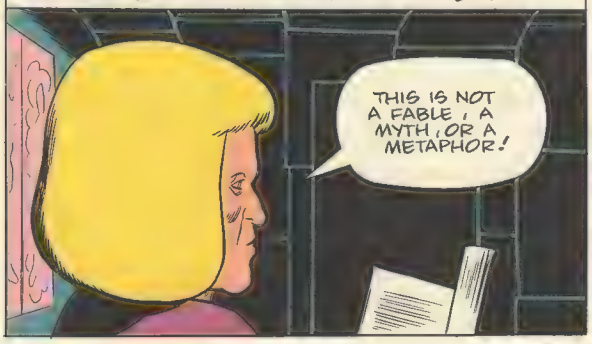
THERE IS NO FAUSTIAN PRICE FOR ALL THIS, JUST A SIMPLE TERM-OF-SERVICE REQUIREMENT.


THE ENTIRETY OF THIS EXCHANGE WILL BE EXPUNGED FROM YOUR MEMORY. YOU WILL ACCOUNT YOUR FORTUNE TO YOUR OWN VIRTUES WITHOUT ANOTHER THOUGHT TO THIS REALM.

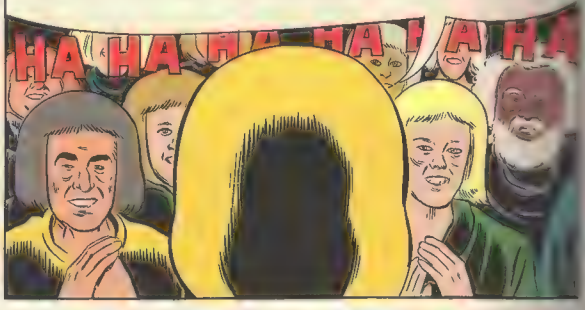
EVERY SELECTEE, FROM CLEOPATRA TO JEFF BEZOS, AGREES TO THIS CONDITION WITHOUT HESITATION, EXCEPT FOR ONE MAN, OUR BELOVED FATHER-FATHER V., FOR WHOM THE PRICE OF TRUE KNOWLEDGE IS POVERTY, PAIN AND SUFFERING.



HIS EXPANDED SENTIENCE GRANTS HIM ACCESS TO THE UNSEEN WORLD BEYOND OUR SHARED REALITY, UNKNOWN TO ANY MAN OR WOMAN IN HISTORY.



WE ARE IN AN ACTUAL SPIRITUAL WAR WITH THE DEMONS WHO USE THE POWERFUL AND THE WEALTHY AS PAWNS IN THEIR GAME OF CONTROL. WE WILL THRIVE THROUGH THE PURITY OF OUR SOULS AND OUR WILLINGNESS TO FACE OBLIVION AND CHAOS!



I WOUND UP READING MY WAY THROUGH THE COMPLETE WORKS OF V., A MIX OF COMPELLINGLY STRANGE PARABLES AND REPETITIVE RAMBLING. I FELT AN UNSETTLING CONNECTION TO THE WHOLE LUX NARRATIVE. HOW BETTER, REALLY, TO EXPLAIN MY OWN IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEY?

I SOON BECAME THAT MOST ANNOYING OF ARCHETYPES, THE OVER-EXUBERANT NEOPHYTE.

ACCORDING TO THE ORIGINAL TEXT, THE SKYCONE PREDATES THE FOURTH TRIBULATION.

I WAS GENUINELY HAPPY DURING THAT TIME. ALL THE IDIOCY OF THE WORLD - THE TWEETS AND SENATE HEARINGS AND HOLIDAY GIFT-GUIDES - SEEMED LIKE A DISTANT MEMORY. HOW COULD I HAVE WASTED A SECOND ON THAT STUFF?

I GREW TO CHERISH THE SIMPLICITY AND ORDER OF OUR LIVES, THE SENSE OF PURPOSE.

THERE WERE THEN THIRTEEN MEMBERS OF THE SECT, INCLUDING V. TO ACHIEVE THE HARMONIOUS FOURTEEN, THEY'D NEED A NEW AURORA. THIS WAS MY DESTINY.

I WAS SOON TO TAKE PART IN A MYSTERIOUS CEREMONY, AFTER WHICH ALL SECRETS WERE MINE TO BE TOLD.

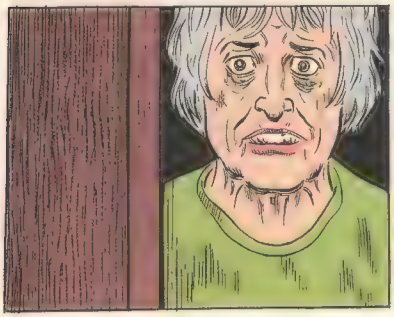
ONE MORNING, A FEW WEEKS INTO MY PREPARATION, THERE WAS A LOUD COMMOTION ON THE GROUNDS, YELLING AND SCREAMING. THIS KIND OF THING NEVER HAPPENED SO IT FREAKED US OUT.

BOBBY HAD DISCOVERED NONO SKULKING AROUND OUTSIDE THE GATE. HE AND SONNY DRAGGED HER INSIDE AND THREW HER IN THE CLOSET BEFORE I GOT A LOOK AT HER.

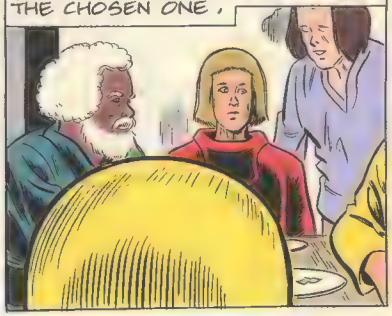
PLEASE! I WANT TO COM BACK! LET

THEY SPENT ALL DAY RUNNING THROUGH A SERIES OF DIALOGUES UNTIL SHE GOT A POSITIVE SCORE.

I STILL HAD A TINY SHRED OF HOPE THAT NONO MIGHT BE PENNY, RIGHT UP UNTIL THE SECOND THEY OPENED THE DOOR.

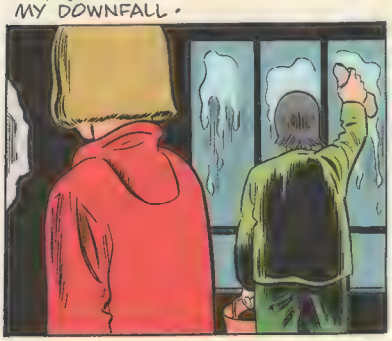


AT FIRST, I WONDERED IF HER RETURN MIGHT BE BAD NEWS FOR MY ASCENDANCE, BUT IT SOON BECAME CLEAR THAT I WAS STILL THE CHOSEN ONE.

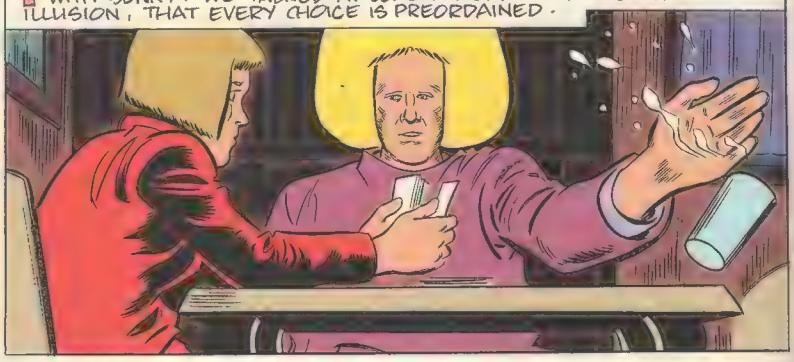


SHE WAS TREATED HARSHLY, LIKE A MEDIEVAL SERVANT, WHICH SHE ACCEPTED WITHOUT A HINT OF PROTEST. SHE WASN'T ALLOWED TO SPEAK OR MAKE EYE CONTACT, TOTAL HUMILIATION.

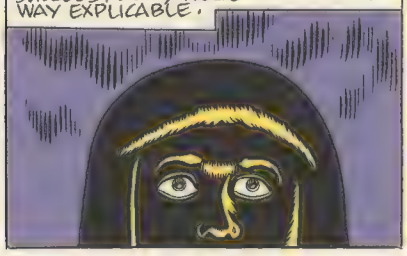
EVEN SO, I COULDN'T HELP BUT FEEL UNEASY IN HER PRESENCE, LIKE SHE WAS SILENTLY PLOTTING MY DOWNFALL.



IN THE FOLLOWING WEEKS, I BEGAN TO HAVE INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS WITH SONNY. WE TALKED AT LENGTH ABOUT HOW FREE WILL IS AN ILLUSION, THAT EVERY CHOICE IS PREORDAINED.

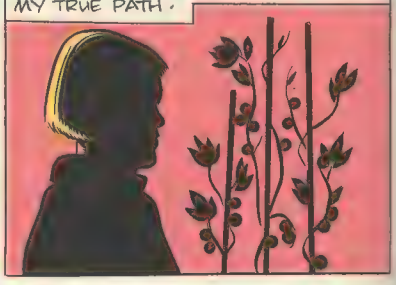


I SPENT LONG HOURS IN DEEP CONTEMPLATION THINKING ABOUT MY LIFE. MORE AND MORE, IT SEEMED CLEAR - OBVIOUS, EVEN - THAT I HAD ACCEPTED THE PRIMAL EXCHANGE, THAT THE MYSTERIES OF MY LIFE (GRANDFATHER, COMA, SUCCESS, ETC.) WERE IN NO OTHER WAY EXPLICABLE.

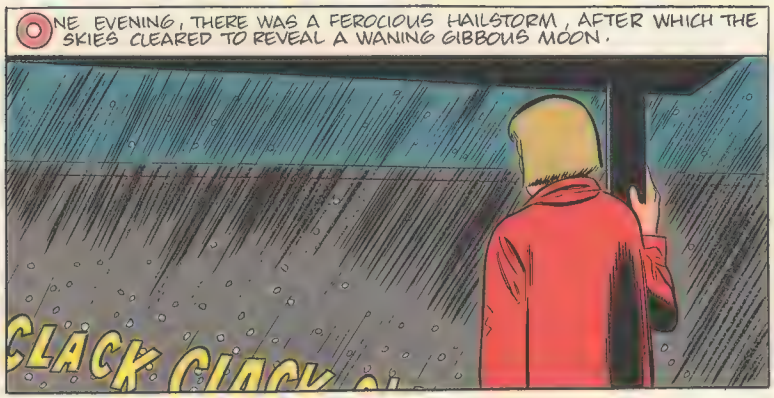


WAS I, LIKE MY FATHER, A PRIME AURORA? AND WHAT ABOUT PENNY? SURELY SHE WAS MORE THAN I MADE HER OUT TO BE.

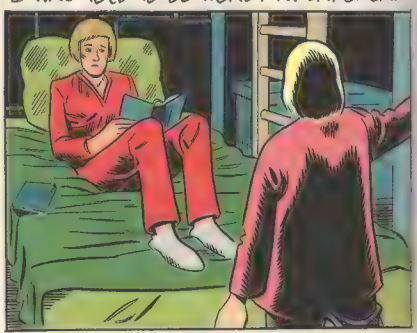
WHY HADN'T I HIRED DETECTIVES TO FIND HER? I COULD HAVE AFFORDED THE BEST OF THE BEST, BUT IT NEVER CROSSED MY MIND. NO, I HAD TO GO THROUGH THIS EXPERIENCE MYSELF, THAT WAS MY TRUE PATH.



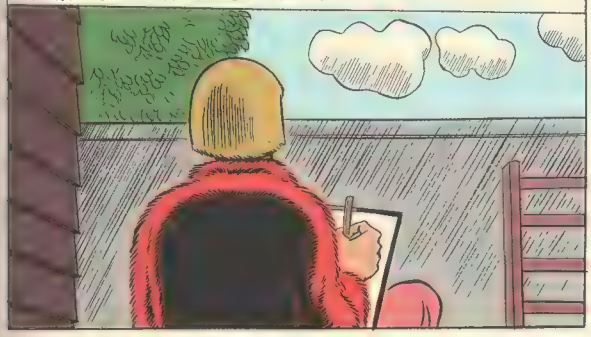
ONE EVENING, THERE WAS A FEROCIOUS HAILSTORM, AFTER WHICH THE SKIES CLEARED TO REVEAL A WANING GIBBOUS MOON.



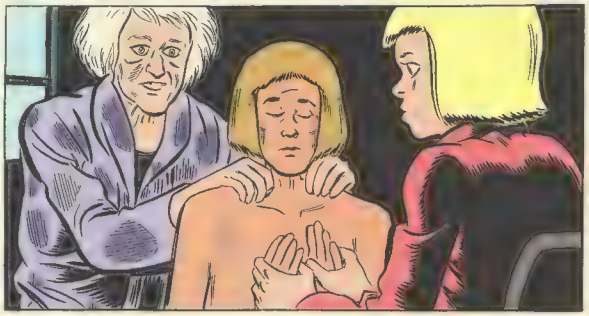
ALICE CAME TO ME, BEAMING. THIS WAS THE FINAL CONFIRMATION EVENT. I WAS TOLD TO BE READY AT DAYBREAK.



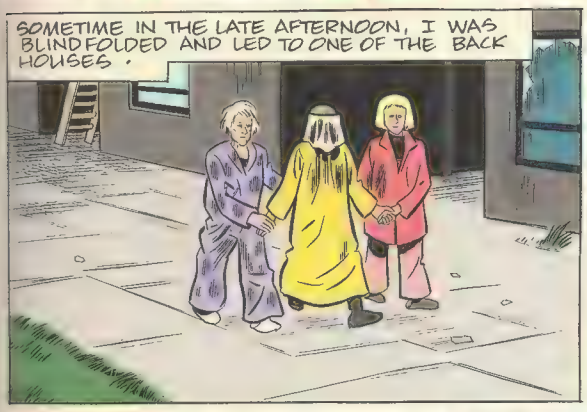
I SLEPT SOUNDLY THAT NIGHT, NOT NERVOUS AT ALL. AFTER BREAKFAST, THEY SENT ME OUT FRONT TO MAKE DRAWINGS OF THE MORNING CLOUDS.



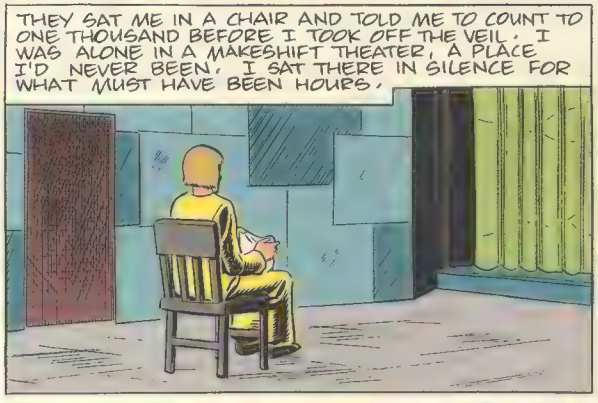
I SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY PREPARING WITH PUPPY AND DIANA. THE MOOD WAS JOYOUS, THOUGH IT FELT MORE LIKE THE BUILD-UP TO A PRIZEFIGHT THAN A WEDDING.



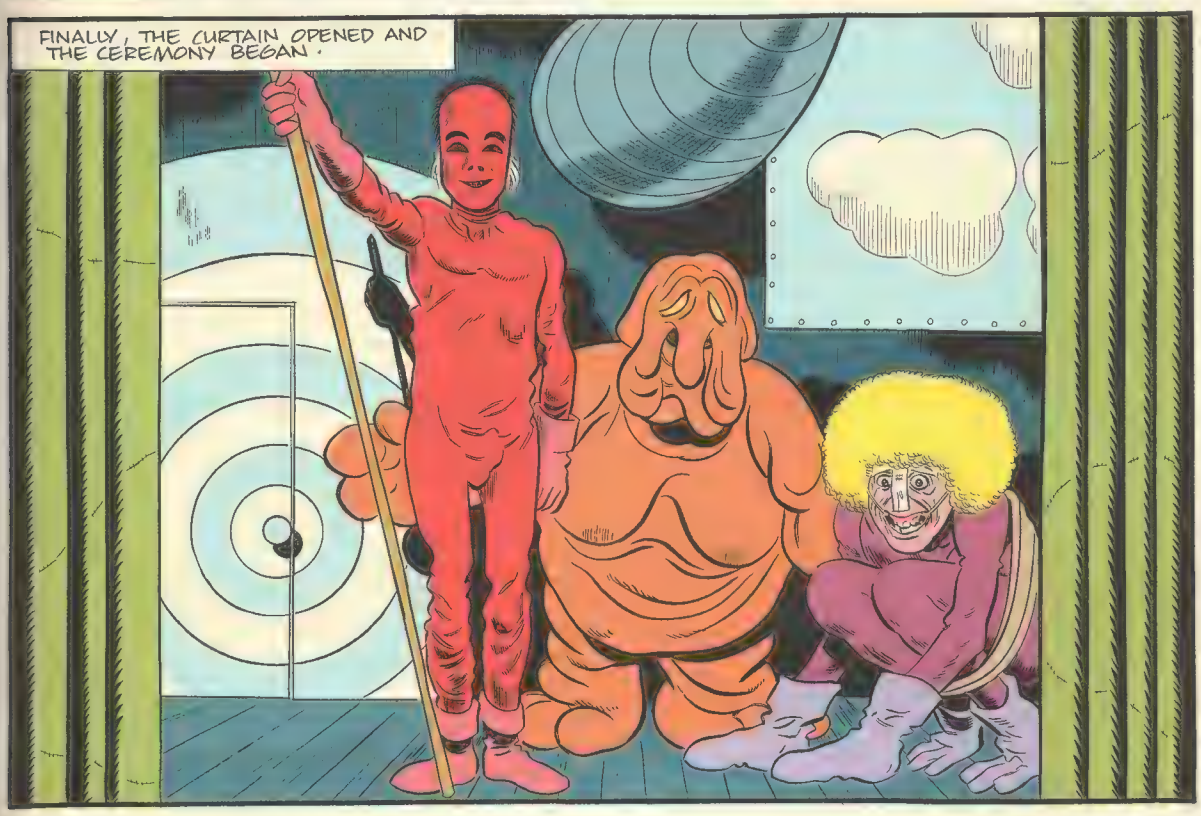
SOMETIME IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, I WAS BLINDFOLDED AND LED TO ONE OF THE BACK HOUSES.



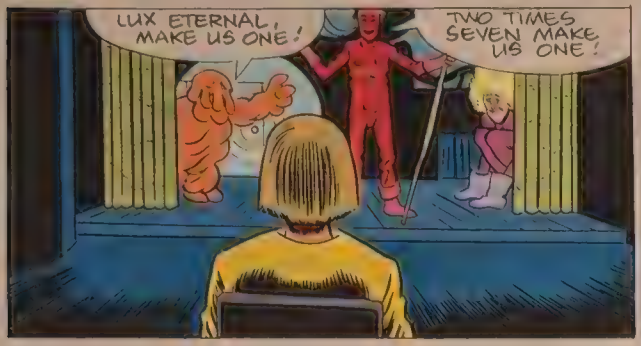
THEY SAT ME IN A CHAIR AND TOLD ME TO COUNT TO ONE THOUSAND BEFORE I TOOK OFF THE VEIL. I WAS ALONE IN A MAKESHIFT THEATER, A PLACE I'D NEVER BEEN. I SAT THERE IN SILENCE FOR WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN HOURS.



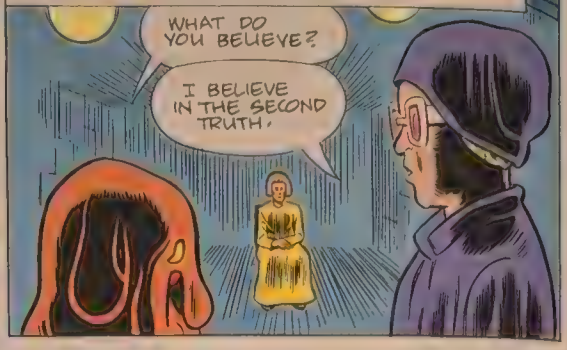
FINALLY, THE CURTAIN OPENED AND THE CEREMONY BEGAN.



THE FORMAT WAS LIKE AN OLD VARIETY SHOW. FIRST, THERE WAS A SLOW PASSION PLAY ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE WAY. (I THINK. IT WAS VERY HARD TO FOLLOW.)



THEN CAME A LONG, IMPROVISED (?) DIALOGUE BETWEEN "THE NEOPHYTE" AND "THE FAT MAN" ABOUT HER (MY) DEVOTION TO THE GROUP.

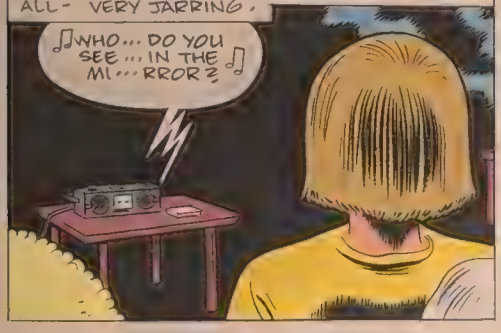


THE NEOPHYTE UNDERWENT AN "ILLUMINATION" AND LEFT THE STAGE. THE OTHERS TURNED AND BECKONED ME TO JOIN THEM.

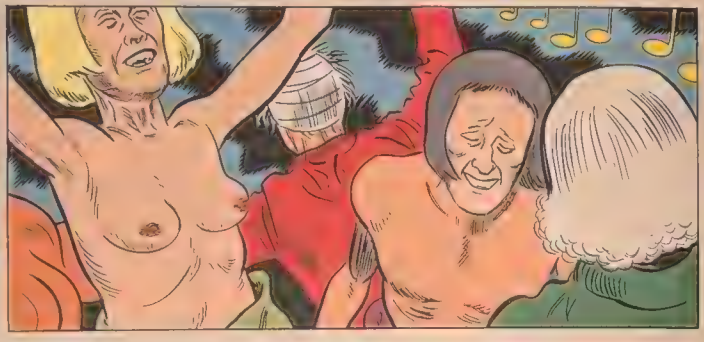
UP CLOSE, I COULD SEE THE PAIN IN BROTHER-BROTHER OUIJA'S EYES. ALL FOR ME, I THOUGHT.

SONNY LED US IN A CALL-AND-RESPONSE CHANT WHILE CHEETAH SET UP AN ANCIENT BOOM-BOX IN FRONT OF THE STAGE.

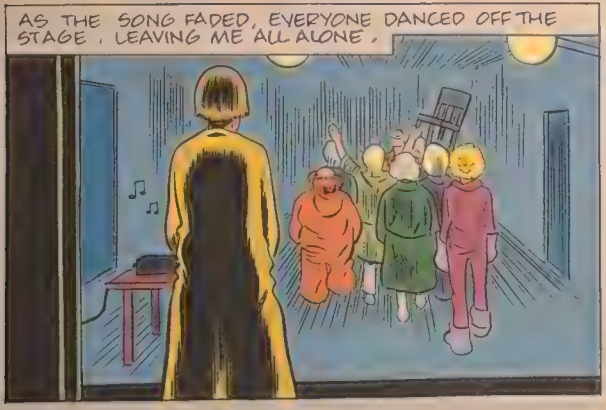
A STRANGE HOMEMADE DIRGE WITH GLOOMY, DRONING VOCALS (V.?) MOANED FROM THE BOX. I REALIZED IT HAD BEEN MONTHS SINCE I'D HEARD ANY KIND OF MUSIC AT ALL- VERY JARRING.



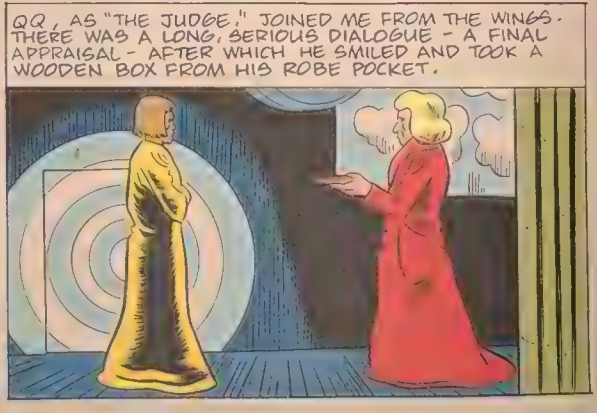
AS THE RHYTHM QUICKENED, WE ALL STARTED DANCING. IT WAS THE ONLY TIME I'D EVER SEEN MY BROTHER-SISTERS LOSE CONTROL; A WILD, ORGIASTIC CELEBRATION.

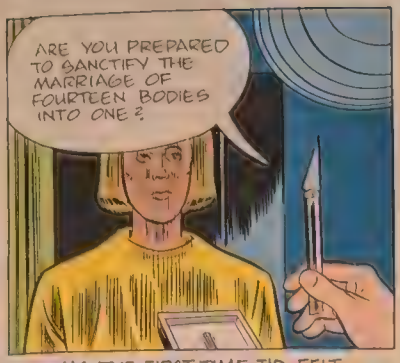


AS THE SONG FADED, EVERYONE DANCED OFF THE STAGE, LEAVING ME ALL ALONE.

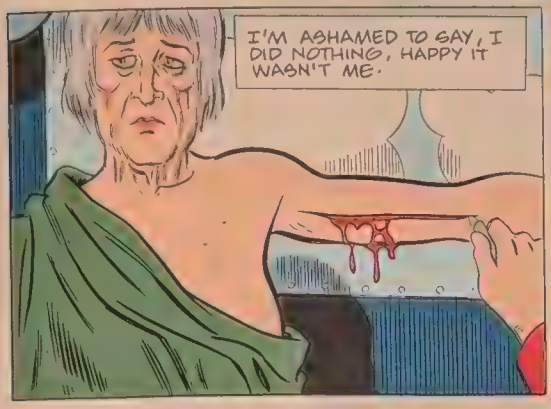


QQ, AS "THE JUDGE," JOINED ME FROM THE WINGS. THERE WAS A LONG, SERIOUS DIALOGUE - A FINAL APPRAISAL - AFTER WHICH HE SMILED AND TOOK A WOODEN BOX FROM HIS ROBE POCKET.



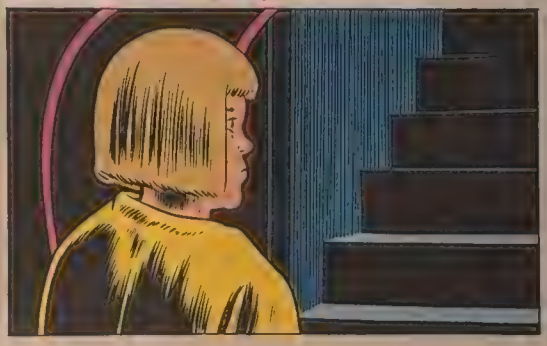


IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I'D FELT ACTUAL FEAR SINCE MY DAYS IN THE CLOSET.



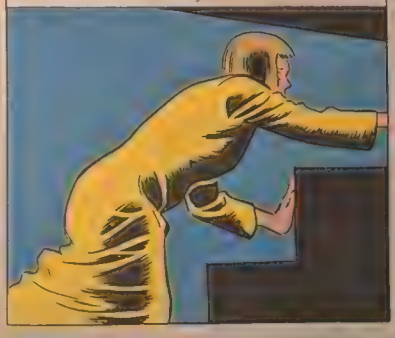
THE "CONE" BEGAN AS A LONG TUNNEL/TUBE BETWEEN BUILDINGS. I COULDN'T IMAGINE HOW THEY MADE IT.

AS A KID, I HAD A RECURRING NIGHTMARE ABOUT BEING TRAPPED AT THE TOP OF A STAIRCASE THAT LED TO NOTHING, A BARE WALL.

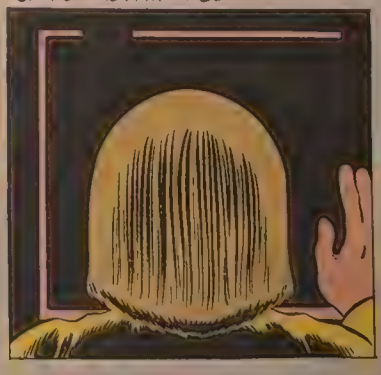


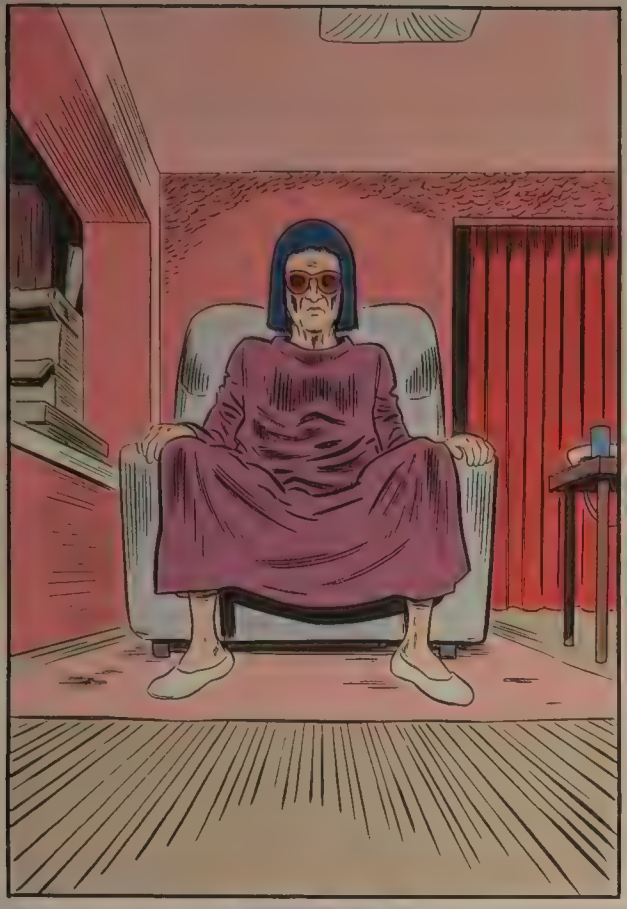
BEHIND ME, A HUGE CROWD WAS PUSHING FORWARD, PINNING ME AGAINST THE WALL, UNABLE TO UNDERSTAND WHY I WOULDN'T MOVE. I WOULD YELL UNTIL I WOKE UP SCREAMING.

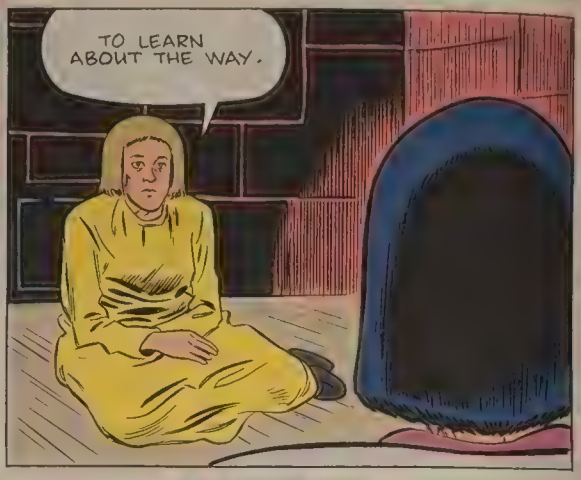
I WONDERED IF THEY SOMEHOW KNEW ABOUT MY DREAM BEFORE THEY DESIGNED THIS PASSAGE. WAS IT JUST FOR ME?



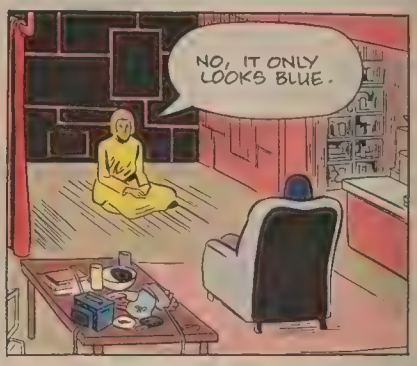
OR MAYBE EVERYBODY HAS THE SAME NIGHTMARES.

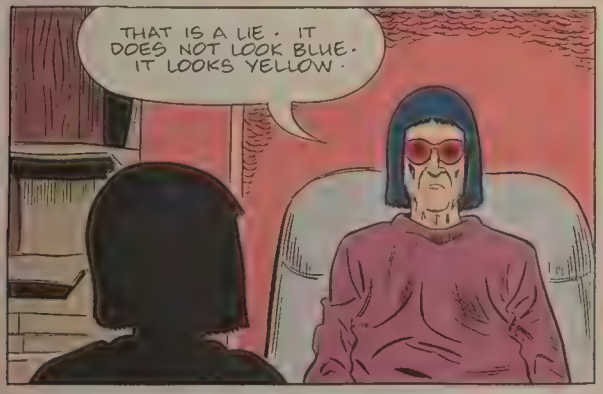


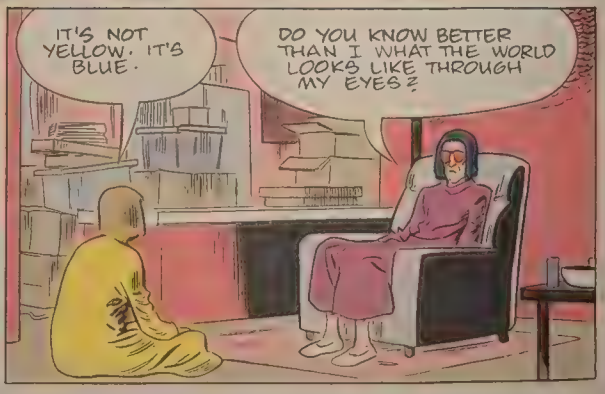




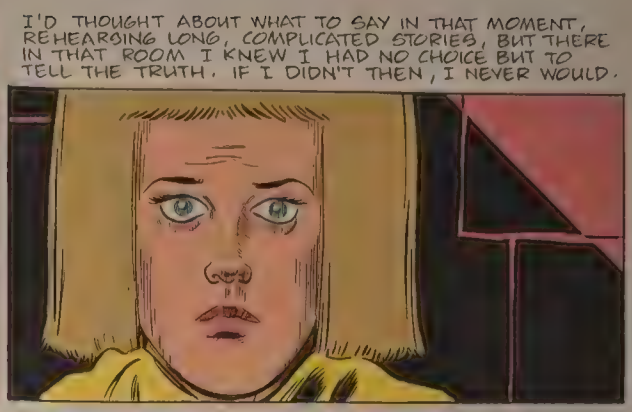
SUDDENLY, I FELT PARALYZED, COMPLETELY SHUT DOWN. HIS GLASSES AND THE SOUND OF HIS VOICE AND THE INCONGRUOUS BACKGROUND DETAILS AND THE DUST MOTES IN THE SUNBEAM ALL SEEMED EQUALLY SIGNIFICANT, IMPOSSIBLE TO FILTER.



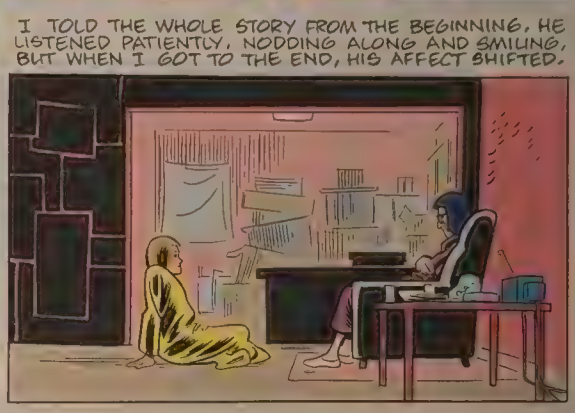




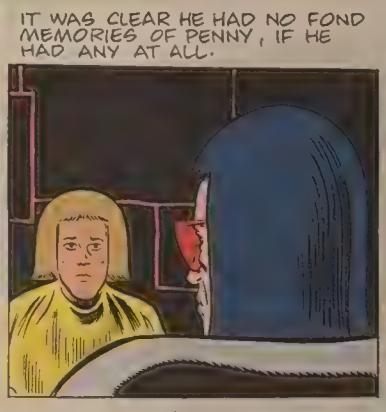
WHY ARE YOU HERE? WHY DO YOU FIND YOURSELF IN THE PRESENCE OF "THE SLEEPLESS ONE"?

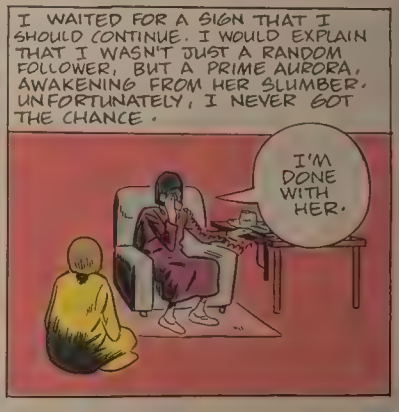

I'D THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT TO SAY IN THAT MOMENT, REHEARSING LONG, COMPLICATED STORIES, BUT THERE IN THAT ROOM I KNEW I HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO TELL THE TRUTH. IF I DIDN'T THEN, I NEVER WOULD.

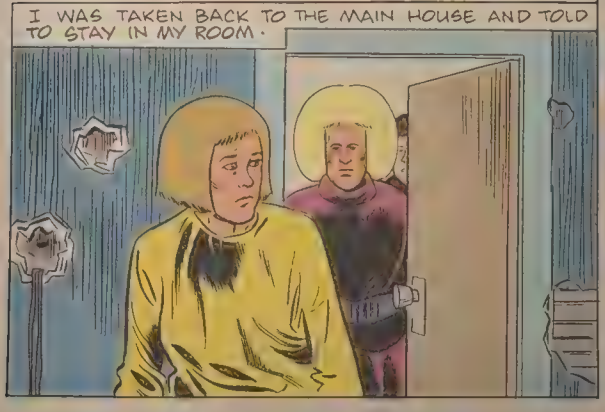
I'M HERE BECAUSE I'M LOOKING FOR MY FATHER.
I'M LOOKING FOR YOU.

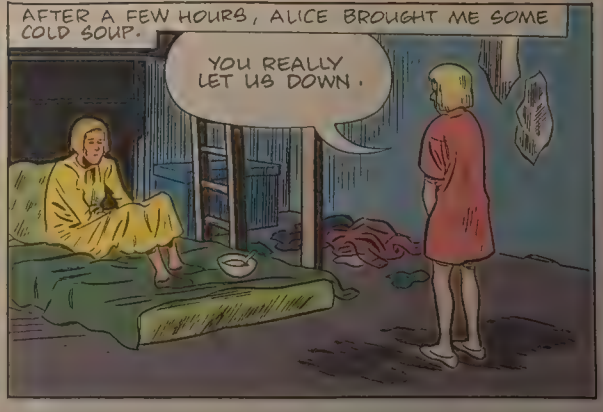

I TOLD THE WHOLE STORY FROM THE BEGINNING. HE LISTENED PATIENTLY, NODDING ALONG AND SMILING, BUT WHEN I GOT TO THE END, HIS AFFECT SHIFTED.

SO WHAT? I'VE HAD HUNDREDS OF CHILDREN, THOUSANDS. YOU'RE NOTHING TO ME.


IT WAS CLEAR HE HAD NO FOND MEMORIES OF PENNY, IF HE HAD ANY AT ALL.


I WAITED FOR A SIGN THAT I SHOULD CONTINUE. I WOULD EXPLAIN THAT I WASN'T JUST A RANDOM FOLLOWER, BUT A PRIME AURORA, AWAKENING FROM HER SLUMBER. UNFORTUNATELY, I NEVER GOT THE CHANCE.
I'M DONE WITH HER.

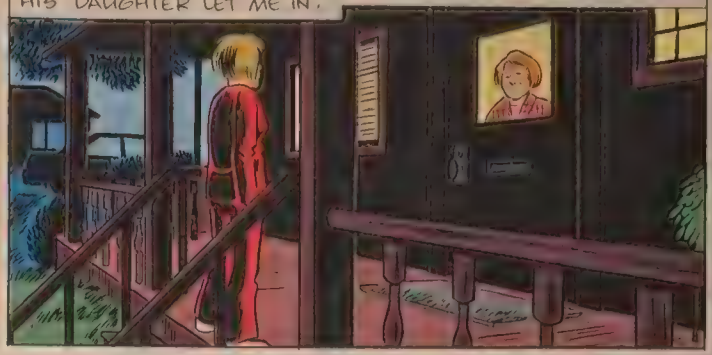

I WAS TAKEN BACK TO THE MAIN HOUSE AND TOLD TO STAY IN MY ROOM.


AFTER A FEW HOURS, ALICE BROUGHT ME SOME COLD SOUP.
YOU REALLY LET US DOWN.

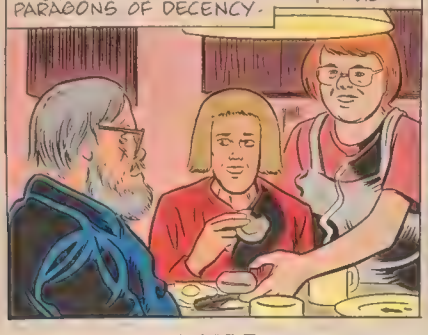
THE NEXT MORNING, I WENT IN TO BREAKFAST, HOPING IT HAD ALL BLOWN OVER. NONO WAS SITTING IN MY CHAIR.
DIANA SENT ME BACK TO MY ROOM WITHOUT ANY FOOD. ALICE NEVER RETURNED.
I STAYED THERE ALL DAY AND INTO THE NIGHT, MY MIND CHURNING.
I THOUGHT ABOUT V.'S ROOM: THE TV AND TELEPHONE, GOSSIP MAGAZINES, EVEN A COMPUTER. I HAD FELT NOTHING, NO CONNECTION.
LATE THAT NIGHT, THE DOOR OPENED, JOLTING ME AWAKE.
SHH.
THEY THINK YOU'RE A SPY, WORKING FOR THE COPS, YOU NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE TONIGHT.
THE SIDE GATE IS UNLOCKED. RUN AS FAR AS YOU CAN AND NEVER COME BACK. DON'T END UP LIKE POOR EVA.
I ASKED HER, "WHY ARE YOU HELPING ME?"
PENNY WAS MY FRIEND. I DON'T BELIEVE WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT HER.
SHE HANDED ME A TORN ENVELOPE AND MOTIONED TOWARD THE DOOR.
IF THEY CATCH YOU, DON'T RAT ME OUT, OKAY?
AND JUST AS EASILY AS I HAD ENTERED, I WAS GONE, RUNNING ON BRITTLE LEGS DEEP INTO THE DARKNESS.

I KEPT GOING FOR WHAT MUST HAVE BEEN FIVE MILES - PURE ADRENALINE - BEFORE TAKING A REST. FOR A BRIEF MOMENT I THOUGHT ABOUT RUNNING BACK AND GETTING INTO BED BEFORE EVERYBODY WOKE UP, BUT I KNEW THAT WAS TOTAL STOCKHOLM SYNDROME.

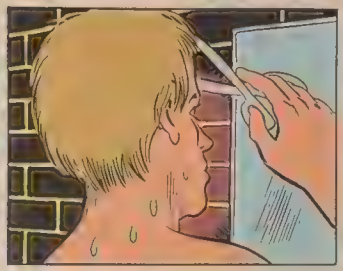
I FINALLY FOUND MY WAY TO IKE'S HOUSE. MY CAR WAS STILL OUT FRONT. I MUST HAVE LOOKED TERRIFYING, BUT HIS DAUGHTER LET ME IN.



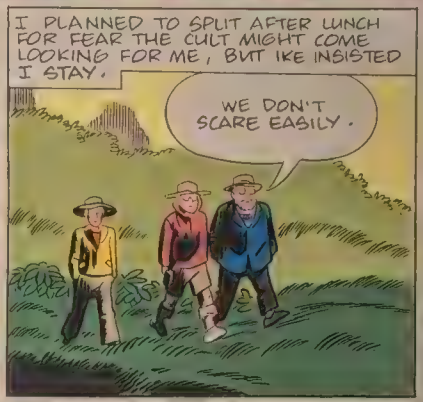
IKE MADE US A HUGE BREAKFAST - THE BEST THING I EVER ATE - AND I TOLD THEM THE WHOLE STORY. THEY WERE SO NICE TO ME, TRUE PARAGONS OF DECENCY.



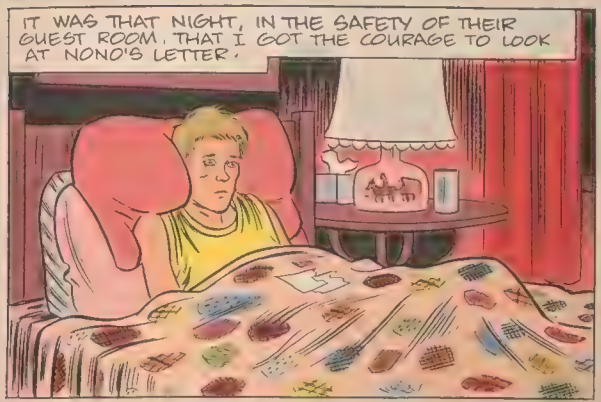
I TOOK A LONG BATH AND FIXED MY HAIR. DEB GAVE ME SOME OLD CLOTHES ("FROM BACK WHEN I WAS SKINNY"). I FELT LIKE I'D BEEN GONE TEN YEARS, BUT IT WAS ONLY A FEW MONTHS.



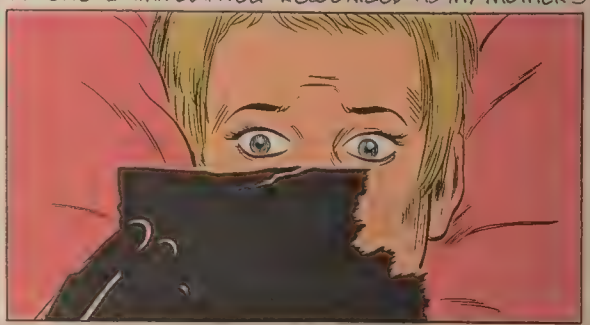
I PLANNED TO SPLIT AFTER LUNCH FOR FEAR THE CULT MIGHT COME LOOKING FOR ME, BUT IKE INSISTED I STAY.



IT WAS THAT NIGHT, IN THE SAFETY OF THEIR GUEST ROOM, THAT I GOT THE COURAGE TO LOOK AT NONO'S LETTER.

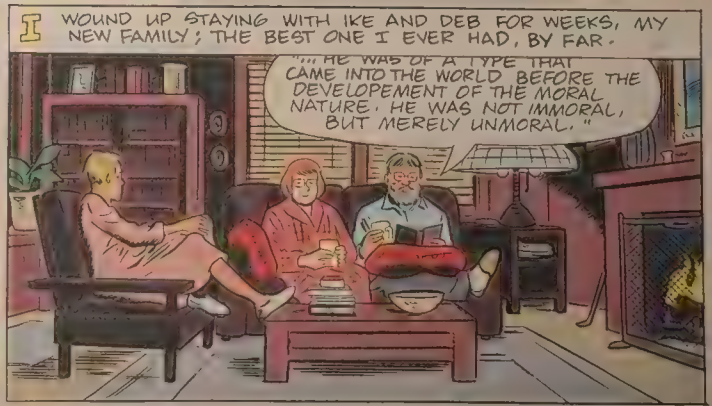


ON THE ENVELOPE, SOMEONE HAD WRITTEN "MARY RUSSELL (MY GRANDPARENTS' FIRST NAMES), SAND VALLEY, TX." THE LETTER ITSELF WAS IN A DISTINCT CURSIVE I IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZED AS MY MOTHER'S.

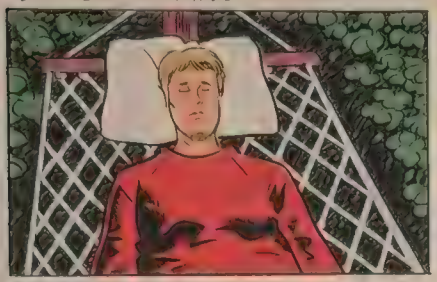


I COULD ONLY READ FRAGMENTS, BUT IT WAS AN ANGRY REBUTTAL TO SOME ACCUSATION OF BETRAYAL. SHE WAS DISILLUSIONED WITH V., SAW HIM AS A FRAUD, AND ALLUDED TO HER OWN "HIGHER ASPIRATIONS." NO MENTION OF ME, OF COURSE.

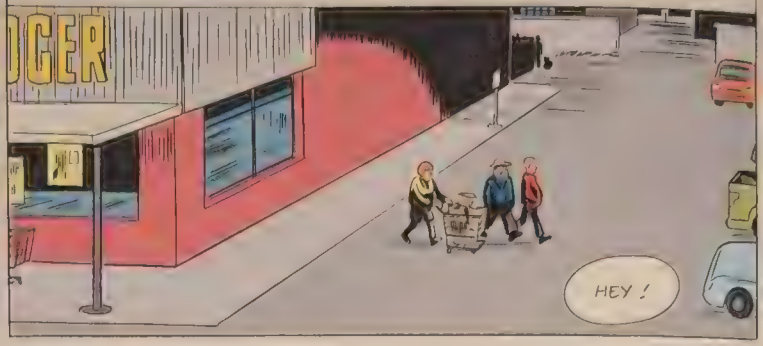
I WOUND UP STAYING WITH IKE AND DEB FOR WEEKS, MY NEW FAMILY; THE BEST ONE I EVER HAD, BY FAR.


"... HE WAS OF A TYPE THAT CAME INTO THE WORLD BEFORE THE DEVELOPEMENT OF THE MORAL NATURE. HE WAS NOT IMMORAL, BUT MERELY UNMORAL."

I SPENT MY DAYS IN DEEP CONTEMPLATION, PROCESSING. I WROTE SOME NOTES ABOUT THE CULT AND SENT THEM IN A LONG TEXT TO DANTE FROM DEB'S PHONE. HE REPLIED WITH A 🙄 EMOJI AND BLOCKED HER NUMBER.



I WAS DONE WITH EVERYTHING, ALL THE BAD STUFF. I'D MET MY FATHER, ACHIEVED CLOSURE, ALL THAT. DEB WAS A HUGE HELP. SHE'D BEEN THROUGH A TON OF SHIT WITH HER EX.



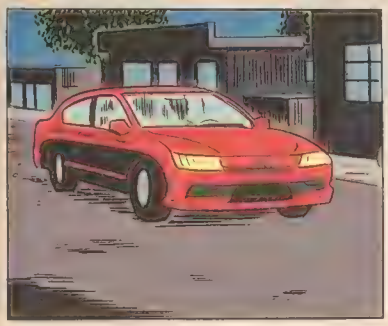
BOBBY AND I RECOGNIZED EACH OTHER AT THE EXACT SAME INSTANT. BY THE TIME I REALIZED WHAT WAS HAPPENING, IT WAS ALMOST TOO LATE.

IF IKE HADN'T FOUGHT HIM OFF, I'M 100 PERCENT SURE I'D BE DEAD RIGHT NOW.

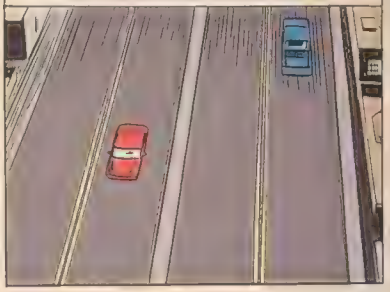
LATER, HE AND DEB TRIED TO LAUGH IT OFF, BUT THAT WAS IT AS FAR AS I WAS CONCERNED. I WASN'T ABOUT TO PUT THESE TWO, OF ALL PEOPLE, IN ANY KIND OF DANGER.

I KNEW THEY'D NEVER LET ME GO, SO I WROTE THEM A LONG LETTER AND SNUCK OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT.

AS MUCH AS I'D MISS THEM, I WAS EXCITED TO MOVE ON, TO START A NEW PHASE IN LIFE. SOMETHING SIMPLE AND SOLID.

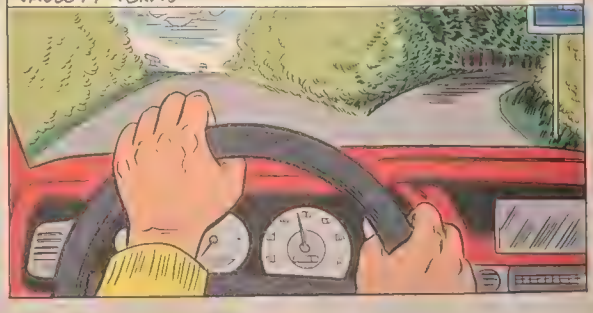


I DECIDED TO HEAD BACK HOME TO CLEAR OUT MY STORAGE AND SEE IF I HAD ANY MONEY LEFT. FROM THERE, I'D DRIVE AROUND (MAYBE GET A USED CAMPER?) AND LOOK FOR A NEW PLACE TO LIVE.

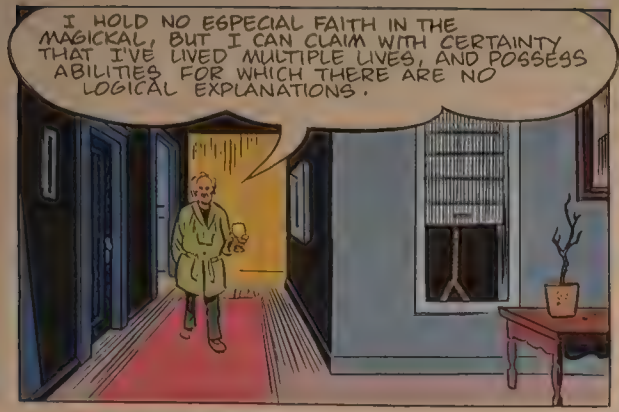


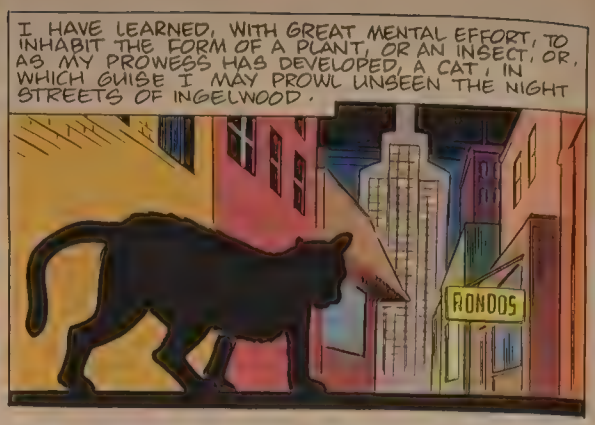
I'D SPEND MY TWILIGHT YEARS IN SOME SMALL TOWN; GET TO KNOW MY NEIGHBORS, MAYBE EVEN A BOYFRIEND (WHY NOT?). I'D TAKE HIKES AND GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL CAUSES.

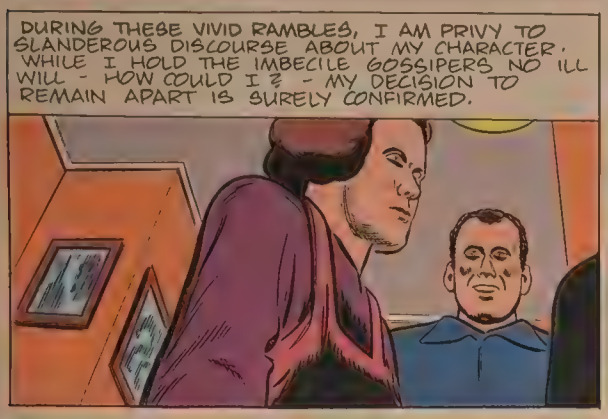
I COULD SEE IT ALL SO CLEARLY, THIS NEW LIFE, BUT SOMEHOW I COULDN'T CONTROL THE WHEEL. I'D WANTED TO CONTINUE SOUTH DOWN THE COAST, BUT FOUND MYSELF HEADED, AS THOUGH OVERRIDDEN BY GHOSTLY HANDS, INEXORABLY TOWARD SAND VALLEY, TEXAS.

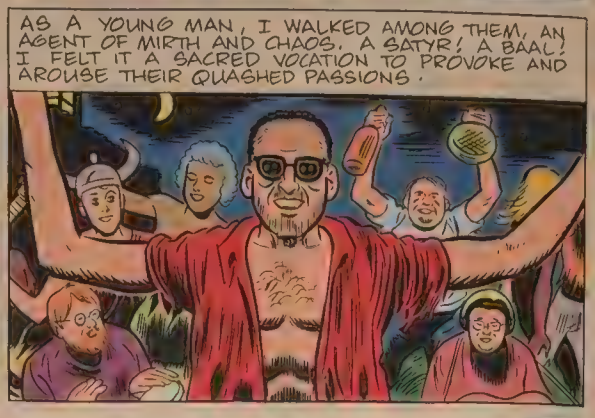


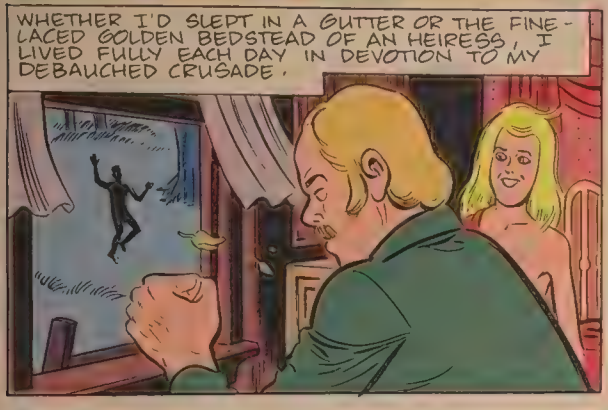
KRUGG
SORRY TO BE THE BEARER OF BAD NEWS, BUT, CONTRARY TO RUMOR, I'M STILL VERY MUCH ALIVE. I HAVEN'T "DROPPED OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH WITHOUT A TRACE," NOR AM I A "DANGEROUS LUNATIC, HIDING FROM JUSTICE." MY NUMBER IS STILL IN THE PHONE-BOOK (IF THOSE, IN FACT, STILL EXIST) AND EVERY DELIVERY BOY IN TOWN KNOWS MY ADDRESS.
THAT I SHOULD CHOOSE TO LIVE APART FROM THE FRAY IN MONASTIC DEVOTION TO MY ART IS SOMEHOW LESS PLAUSIBLE THAN THE MOST BIZARRE GRAND GUIGNOL FABRICATION!
Savarin
IT'S NOT THAT I DISDAIN SUNLIGHT - AU CONTRAIRE, I CHERISH GREAT SOL AND HIS HEALING EMBRACE! - NOR AM I A "MISANTHROPE." I MERELY WISH TO EVADE ANY DISTRACTION FROM THE BOUNTIFUL STIMULI OF MY OWN DOMAIN.
THIS WALL STAIN, FOR EXAMPLE, FROM A CHILDHOOD ROOT-BEER MISHAP, IS AS FULLY A PART OF MY OWN VISUAL CANON AS THE COLOR OF THE SKY OR MY MOTHER'S FACE.

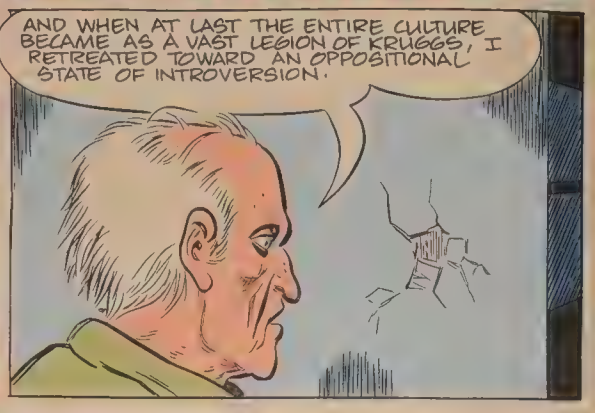

I HOLD NO ESPECIAL FAITH IN THE MAGICKAL, BUT I CAN CLAIM WITH CERTAINTY THAT I'VE LIVED MULTIPLE LIVES, AND POSSESS ABILITIES FOR WHICH THERE ARE NO LOGICAL EXPLANATIONS.

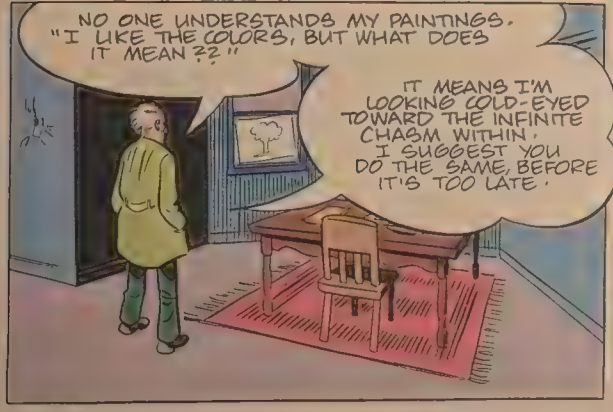

I HAVE LEARNED, WITH GREAT MENTAL EFFORT, TO INHABIT THE FORM OF A PLANT, OR AN INSECT, OR, AS MY PROWESS HAS DEVELOPED, A CAT, IN WHICH GUISE I MAY PROWL UNSEEN THE NIGHT STREETS OF INGELWOOD.
RONDOS

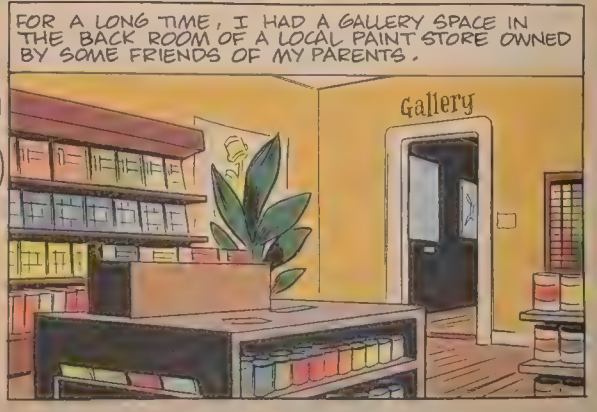

DURING THESE VIVID RAMBLES, I AM PRIVY TO SLANDEROUS DISCOURSE ABOUT MY CHARACTER. WHILE I HOLD THE IMBECILE GOSSIPERS NO ILL WILL - HOW COULD I ? - MY DECISION TO REMAIN APART IS SURELY CONFIRMED.

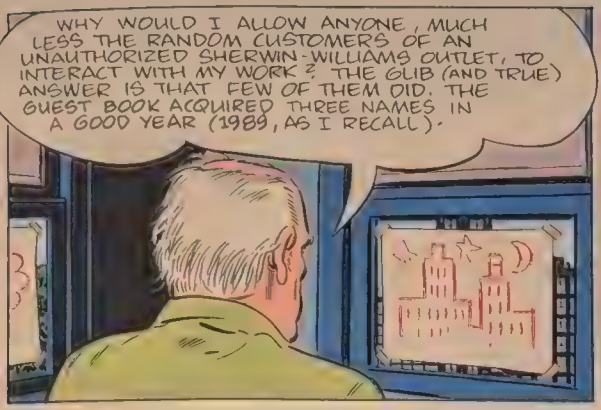

AS A YOUNG MAN, I WALKED AMONG THEM, AN AGENT OF MIRTH AND CHAOS. A SATYR! A BAAL! I FELT IT A SACRED VOCATION TO PROVOKE AND AROUSE THEIR QUASHED PASSIONS.

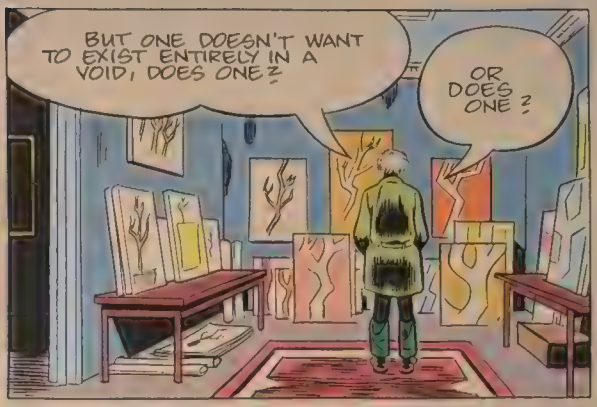

WHETHER I'D SLEPT IN A GUTTER OR THE FINE-LACED GOLDEN BEDSTEAD OF AN HEIRESS, I LIVED FULLY EACH DAY IN DEVOTION TO MY DEBAUCHED CRUSADE.

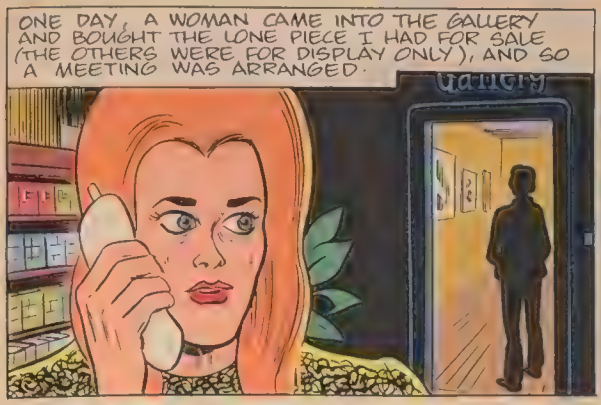

AND WHEN AT LAST THE ENTIRE CULTURE BECAME AS A VAST LEGION OF KRUGGS, I RETREATED TOWARD AN OPPOSITIONAL STATE OF INTROVERSION.

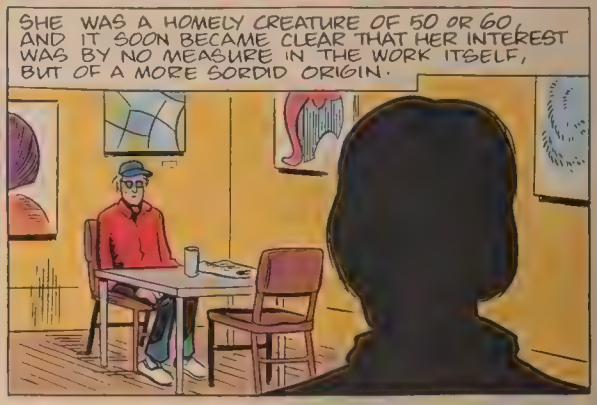

NO ONE UNDERSTANDS MY PAINTINGS. "I LIKE THE COLORS, BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN ??"
IT MEANS I'M LOOKING COLD-EYED TOWARD THE INFINITE CHASM WITHIN. I SUGGEST YOU DO THE SAME, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

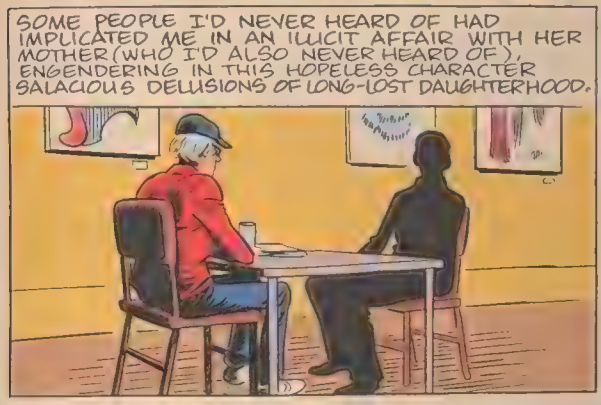

FOR A LONG TIME, I HAD A GALLERY SPACE IN THE BACK ROOM OF A LOCAL PAINT STORE OWNED BY SOME FRIENDS OF MY PARENTS.
Gallery

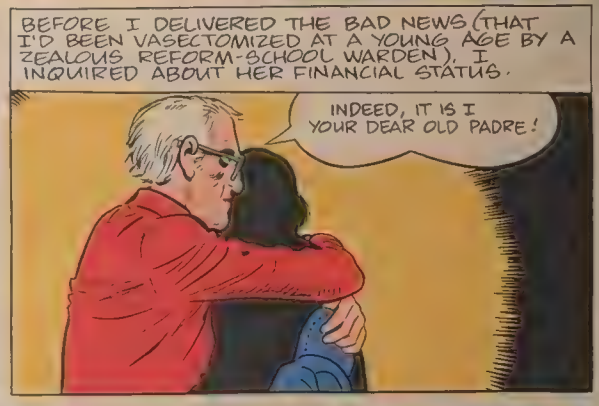

WHY WOULD I ALLOW ANYONE, MUCH LESS THE RANDOM CUSTOMERS OF AN UNAUTHORIZED SHERWIN-WILLIAMS OUTLET, TO INTERACT WITH MY WORK? THE GLIB (AND TRUE) ANSWER IS THAT FEW OF THEM DID. THE GUEST BOOK ACQUIRED THREE NAMES IN A GOOD YEAR (1989, AS I RECALL).

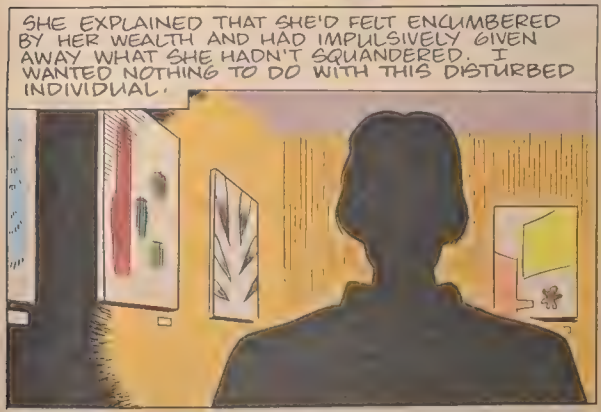

BUT ONE DOESN'T WANT TO EXIST ENTIRELY IN A VOID, DOES ONE?
OR DOES ONE?

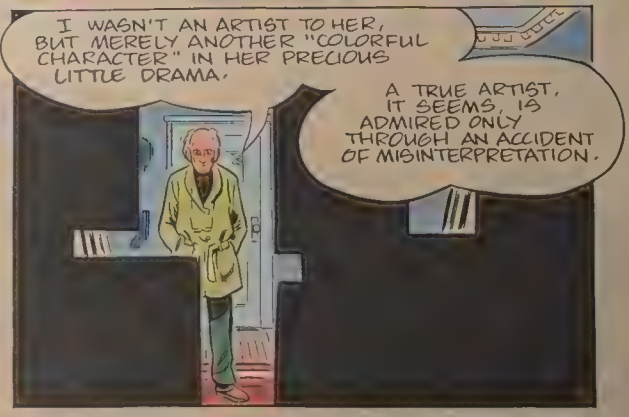

ONE DAY, A WOMAN CAME INTO THE GALLERY AND BOUGHT THE LONE PIECE I HAD FOR SALE (THE OTHERS WERE FOR DISPLAY ONLY), AND SO A MEETING WAS ARRANGED.
Gallery


SHE WAS A HOMELY CREATURE OF 50 OR 60, AND IT SOON BECAME CLEAR THAT HER INTEREST WAS BY NO MEASURE IN THE WORK ITSELF, BUT OF A MORE SORDID ORIGIN.


SOME PEOPLE I'D NEVER HEARD OF HAD IMPLICATED ME IN AN ILLICIT AFFAIR WITH HER MOTHER (WHO I'D ALSO NEVER HEARD OF), ENGENDERING IN THIS HOPELESS CHARACTER SALACIOUS DELUSIONS OF LONG-LOST DAUGHTERHOOD.


BEFORE I DELIVERED THE BAD NEWS (THAT I'D BEEN VASECTOMIZED AT A YOUNG AGE BY A ZEALOUS REFORM-SCHOOL WARDEN), I INQUIRED ABOUT HER FINANCIAL STATUS.
INDEED, IT IS I YOUR DEAR OLD PADRE!


SHE EXPLAINED THAT SHE'D FELT ENCUMBERED BY HER WEALTH AND HAD IMPULSIVELY GIVEN AWAY WHAT SHE HADN'T SQUANDERED. I WANTED NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS DISTURBED INDIVIDUAL.


I WASN'T AN ARTIST TO HER, BUT MERELY ANOTHER "COLORFUL CHARACTER" IN HER PRECIOUS LITTLE DRAMA.
A TRUE ARTIST, IT SEEMS, IS ADMIRED ONLY THROUGH AN ACCIDENT OF MISINTERPRETATION.

AFTER THIS EPISODE, I SUSPENDED CONTACT WITH THE GALLERY, DESPITE NUMEROUS CALLS FROM THE VAN THORNE CHILDREN TO PLEASE COME PICK UP MY PAINTINGS FROM THEIR MOTHER'S STORAGE UNIT.
THE UNHAPPY TRUTH IS THAT ANY SUCH ERRAND WOULD PRESENT AN ASSAULT TO MY SENSES SO VIOLENT I MIGHT REQUIRE A MONTH OF BEDREST.
AS MY RAMBLES OF THE MIND, BE THEY REAL (AS I CONTEND) OR IMAGINED, GROW EVER MORE VIVID AND AGREEABLE, THIS FEROCIOUS DEVOTION TO THE INWARD HAS FRAYED MY SENSITIVITIES RAW.
THE LONG DAYS OF IMMERSION HAVE RENDERED ME UNABLE TO ADJUST DOWNWARD FROM THE RECEPTIVITY TO WHICH I'VE BECOME ATTUNED.
A MERE WALK IN THE PARK WOULD BECOME AS A PSYCHOSIS-INDUCING KALEIDOSCOPE OF GRASS-BLADES AND PIGEON FEATHERS, EVERY ELEMENT SHRIEKING FOR INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION, AN INTOLERABLE BARRAGE OF FILTERLESS DETAIL.

DOOMSDAY

AND SO ANOTHER TEN YEARS PASSED AND I FOUND MYSELF AT LAST IN A STATE OF NEAR-CONTENTMENT, LIVING SEXLESS AND INVISIBLE IN THE BLISSFULLY-IRRELEVANT VACATION TOWN OF PINE RIVER, CA.

HA! WHO YOU TALKIN' TO, GIRL?

MYSELF! WHO ELSE WOULD LISTEN?

I'M KNOWN AROUND TOWN AS A NICE OLD(ER) LADY, FLINTY AND SELF-SUFFICIENT, BELOVED BY MY ILK, A TRUSTY VOLUNTEER FOR LOCAL EVENTS, PROTEST MARCHES, AND DOGSITTING.

I LIVE HERE IN THIS CONVERTED TOOL SHED BEHIND AN AIRBNB-RENTAL VICTORIAN, WHERE I PAY A REDUCED RENT FOR LOOKING AFTER "THE INVADERS," AS THEY ARE KNOWN (ONLY TO ME).

THE PLACE IS OWNED BY A LAZY TECH COUPLE WHO BARELY EVER VISIT, THANK GOD, AND WHO FULLY (OVER?) APPRECIATE ME AND MY FLINTY, SELF-SUFFICIENT WAYS.

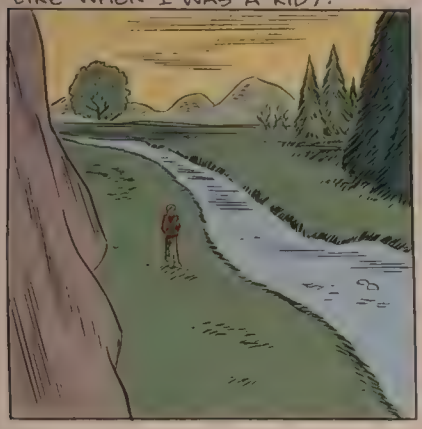
MOST OF THE OCCUPIERS (ALT. TERM) ARE REALLY NICE. COMMON GENUSES INCLUDE "NATURE GRANNIES," "SUBURBAN WATER BRATS," AND (CURRENTLY) "RICH GOLF ASSHOLES."

WHO WON?

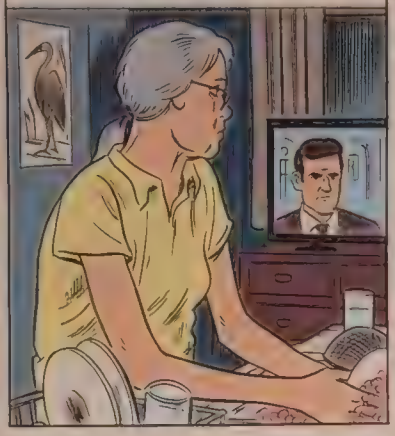
DON'T LOOK AT ME!

AT THIS POINT, I GET ALONG WITH EVERYBODY. WHO AM I TO BE JUDGMENTAL?

MY DAILY ROUTINE CONSISTS OF READING, LONG WALKS, AND WATCHING TV (MOSTLY OLD SHOWS MY GRANDPARENTS USED TO LIKE WHEN I WAS A KID).



I STILL WRITE OCCASIONALLY, THOUGH I KEEP ALL THAT TO MYSELF, AND I HAVE MY LITTLE WORKSHOP OUT BACK.

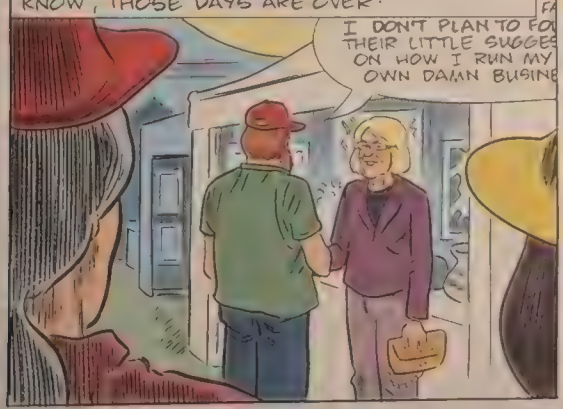


I LIVE VERY CHEAPLY, WAITING FOR SOCIAL SECURITY TO KICK IN. LIZA B. WIPED OUT ALL MY SAVINGS WITH BAD INVESTMENTS, BUT LUCKILY I MAKE ENOUGH TO COVER MY BILLS BY SELLING CANDLES AT THE WEEKEND ARTWALK.

THIS IS MY SOCIAL CIRCLE: ALL THE BEAUTIFUL, CRAZY WOMEN (AND MAN) WHO MAKE AMERICA'S GEOMETRIC TURQUOISE JEWELRY AND HERON-BASED GRAPHICS.

FOREMOST AMONG THESE IS MY BELOVED APRIL, CRAFTER OF EXQUISITE WILDFLOWER DECOUPAGE, AND RADIATOR OF POSITIVITY, WARMTH, AND KINDNESS.

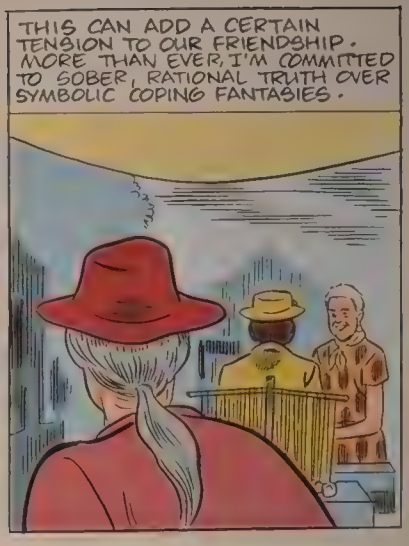
LIKE MANY OTHERS, OURS IS A DIVIDED TOWN, WITH US HIPPIE ARTISTS ON ONE SIDE AND GROSS REDNECK IDIOTS ON THE OTHER. WE USED TO ALL GET ALONG BUT, AS YOU KNOW, THOSE DAYS ARE OVER.



YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL AND KEEP YOUR DISTANCE.

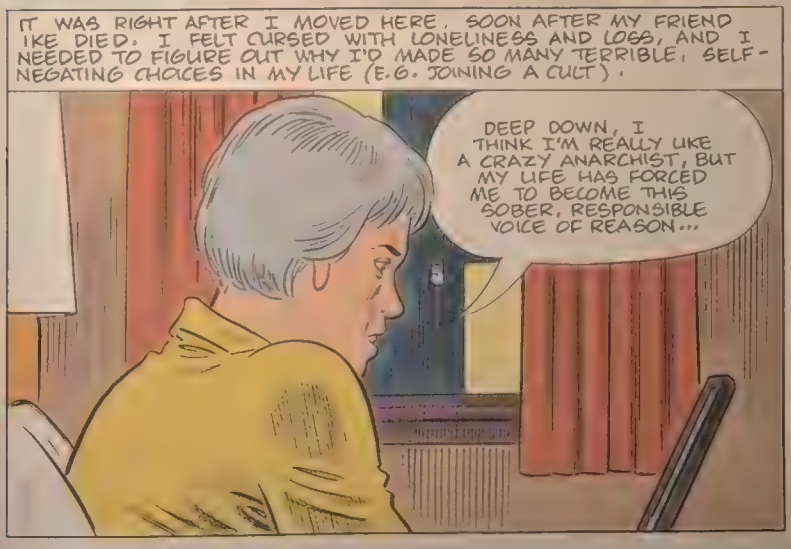
EVEN WITH APRIL, ALANNA, AND LORRIE THE LAMPSHADE LADY IN MY LIFE, I STILL FEEL VERY ALONE SOMETIMES.
I KNOW YOU'RE NOT INTO CHURCH, BU THIS POT-LUCK MIGHT ACTUALLY BE KIND-OF

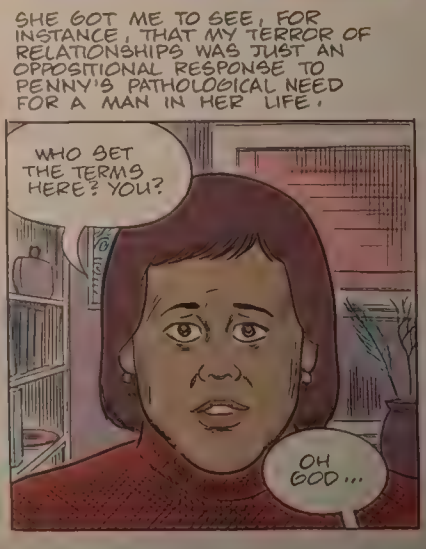
APRIL COMES FROM A HUGE FAMILY WITH GROWN CHILDREN. SHE AND ALANNA ARE VERY INVOLVED IN THEIR CHURCH (A WEIRD CATHOLIC OFFSHOOT WITH FEMALE PRIESTS AND LOTS OF PURPLE). THEY'RE INTO ALL KINDS OF NEW-AGE STUFF, THOUGH WITH THAT "I'M SORT-OF KIDDING... EXCEPT I'M NOT" VIBE.
WHAT SHOULD I BRING?

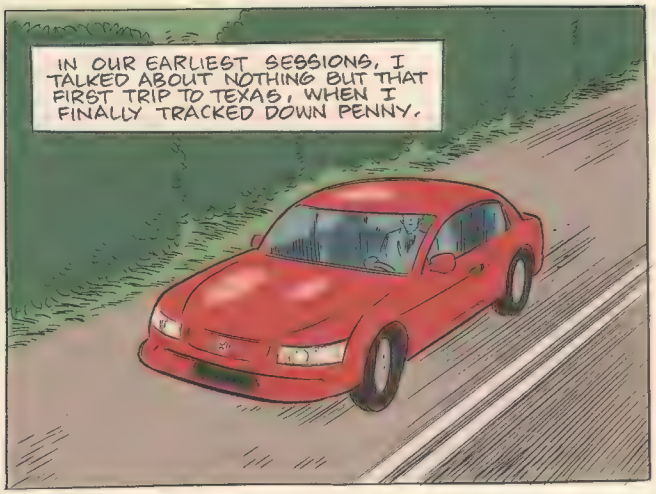

THIS CAN ADD A CERTAIN TENSION TO OUR FRIENDSHIP. MORE THAN EVER, I'M COMMITTED TO SOBER, RATIONAL TRUTH OVER SYMBOLIC COPING FANTASIES.

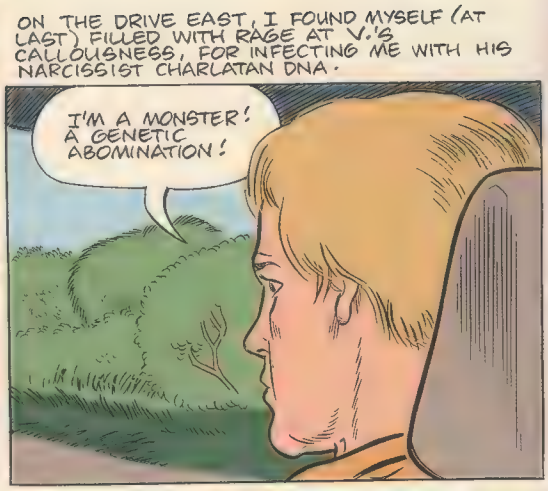
MY JOURNEY OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS HAS INVOLVED CONFRONTING THE CONFOUNDING MYSTERIES OF MY LIFE.
A U.F.O. IS MORE LIKELY TO BE A MILITARY WEATHER DRONE THAN AN INTERGALACTIC SPACECRAFT.

I STARTED SEEING DR. JOY VIA VIDEOCHAT DURING THE FIRST PANDEMIC, AND EVEN AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, WE STILL HAVE YET TO MEET IN PERSON.
TO LOSE THE MOST IMPORTANT FIGURE IN YOUR LIFE, WHO CARED FOR YOU SO BEAUTIFULLY... OF COURSE THAT COULD CAUSE A SERIOUS EPISODE...

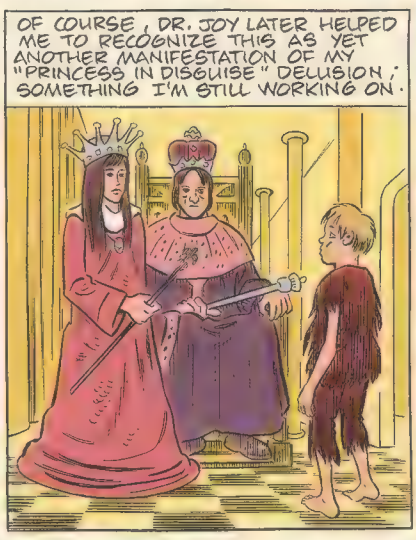

IT WAS RIGHT AFTER I MOVED HERE, SOON AFTER MY FRIEND IKE DIED. I FELT CURSED WITH LONELINESS AND LOSS, AND I NEEDED TO FIGURE OUT WHY I'D MADE SO MANY TERRIBLE, SELF-NEGATING CHOICES IN MY LIFE (E.G. JOINING A CULT).
DEEP DOWN, I THINK I'M REALLY LIKE A CRAZY ANARCHIST, BUT MY LIFE HAS FORCED ME TO BECOME THIS SOBER, RESPONSIBLE VOICE OF REASON...


SHE GOT ME TO SEE, FOR INSTANCE, THAT MY TERROR OF RELATIONSHIPS WAS JUST AN OPPOSITIONAL RESPONSE TO PENNY'S PATHOLOGICAL NEED FOR A MAN IN HER LIFE.
WHO SET THE TERMS HERE? YOU?
OH GOD...

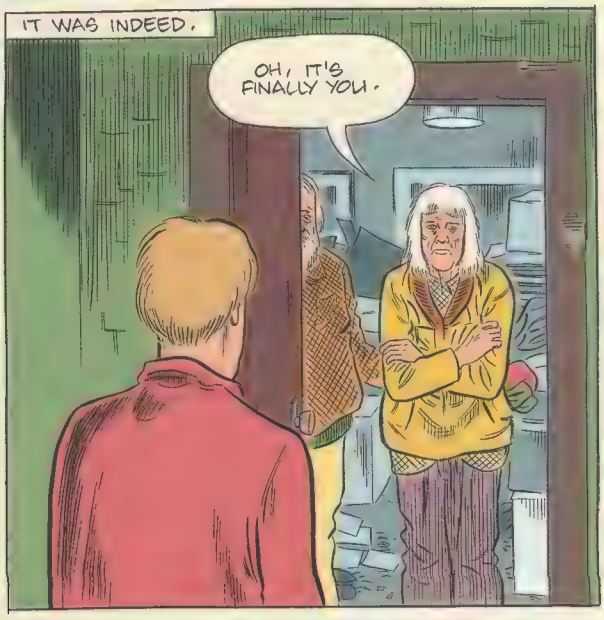

IN OUR EARLIEST SESSIONS, I TALKED ABOUT NOTHING BUT THAT FIRST TRIP TO TEXAS, WHEN I FINALLY TRACKED DOWN PENNY.

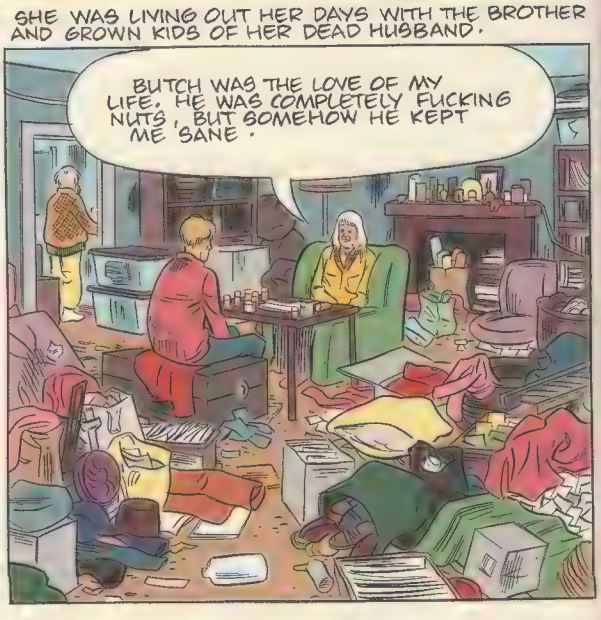

ON THE DRIVE EAST, I FOUND MYSELF (AT LAST) FILLED WITH RAGE AT V.'S CALLOUSNESS, FOR INFECTING ME WITH HIS NARCISSIST CHARLATAN DNA.
I'M A MONSTER! A GENETIC ABOMINATION!

I BEGAN TO THINK OF PENNY AS A NOBLE REBEL-IN-HIDING, A KATHY SOLIAH-ESQUE SUBURBAN TERRORIST. I IMAGINED JOINING HER REVOLUTION, BONDING OVER OUR DEDICATION TO THE CAUSE.
WANTED


OF COURSE, DR. JOY LATER HELPED ME TO RECOGNIZE THIS AS YET ANOTHER MANIFESTATION OF MY "PRINCESS IN DISGUISE" DELUSION; SOMETHING I'M STILL WORKING ON.

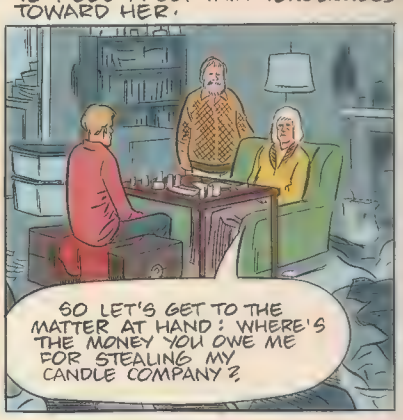
THE REALITY WAS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM WHAT YOU IMAGINED, THOUGH, WASN'T IT?


IT WAS INDEED.
OH, IT'S FINALLY YOU.


SHE WAS LIVING OUT HER DAYS WITH THE BROTHER AND GROWN KIDS OF HER DEAD HUSBAND.
BUTCH WAS THE LOVE OF MY LIFE. HE WAS COMPLETELY FUCKING NUTS, BUT SOMEHOW HE KEPT ME SANE.

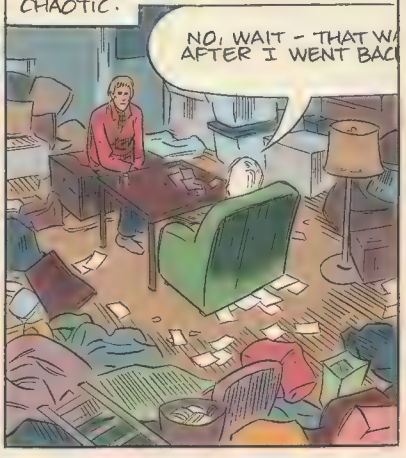
IT WAS A LOT EASIER TO TALK ABOUT ALL THE PAINFUL STUFF THAN I'D ANTICIPATED. IF THERE HAD EVER BEEN ANY SORROW OR REGRET, SHE WAS LONG OVER IT.

SHE WAS BLUNT TO THE POINT OF CRUELTY, BUT AT LEAST SHE DIDN'T TRY TO JUSTIFY HERSELF. I WAS SO RELIEVED TO HEAR IT ALL LAID OUT - JUST THE PLAIN FACTS - THAT I BEGAN TO FEEL A CERTAIN TENDERNESS TOWARD HER.



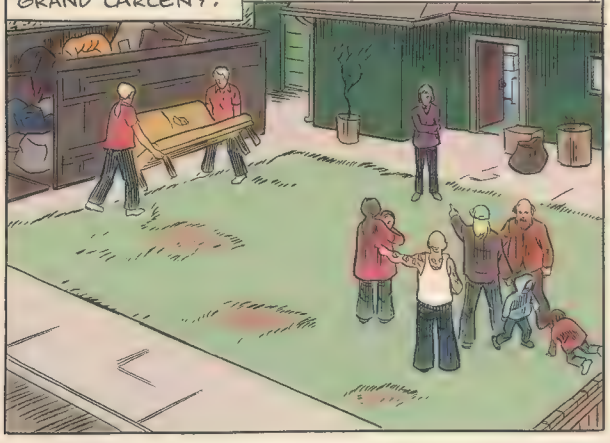
THAT'S WHEN THE FLOODGATES OPENED AND DECADES OF PARANOID RESENTMENT SPILLED FORTH. I DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER TO RESPOND. IT FELT LIKE TIME HAD BEEN ERASED AND WE WERE BACK ALONE IN THAT CRAPPY APARTMENT, RANTING ABOUT THE NEIGHBORS.

LATER, SHE CONFIRMED THAT MY HYPOTHESIS OF HOW SHE'D MET V. WAS BASICALLY CORRECT, THOUGH (OF COURSE) WAY MORE COMPLICATED AND CHAOTIC.

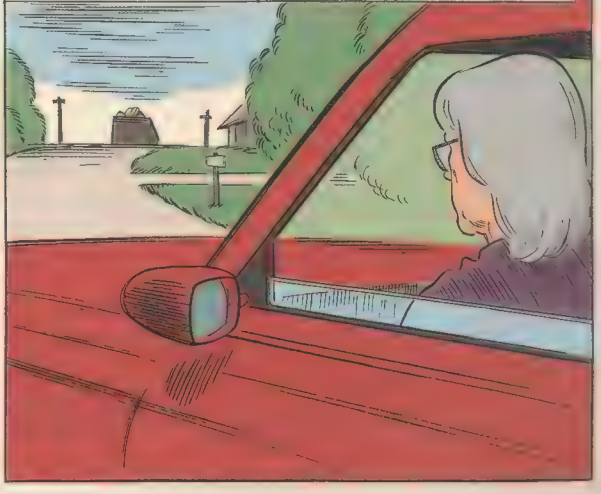


SHE CALLED THE CULT "A DEN OF SNAKES AND IDIOTS" AND TOLD ME WITH ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY THAT V. WAS NOT MY FATHER.

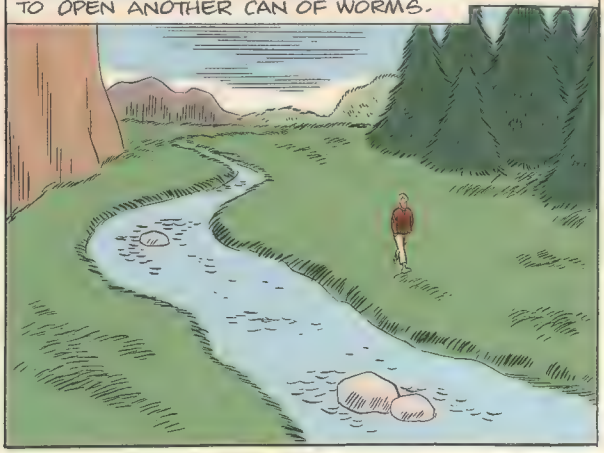
TWO YEARS LATER, SHE WAS DEAD. AS SOLE HEIR TO HER "ESTATE" (BY LAW; THERE WAS NO WILL), I GOT THE HONOR OF THROWING AWAY HER MOUNTAINS OF GARBAGE AND PAYING HER DEBTS, WHILE MY DELIGHTFUL ADOPTED FAMILY ACCUSED ME OF "DEEP-STATE MIND-TRICKS" AND GRAND LARCENY.



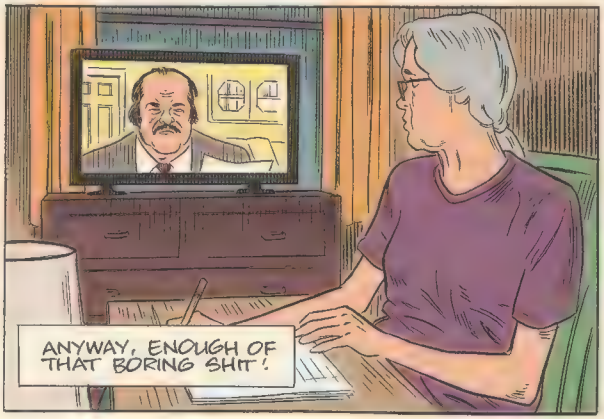
NEVER HAVE I FELT MORE RELIEF - A TRUE BIBLICAL CLEANSING - THAN WHEN THAT FINAL DUMPSTER WAS HAULED OVER THE HORIZON.



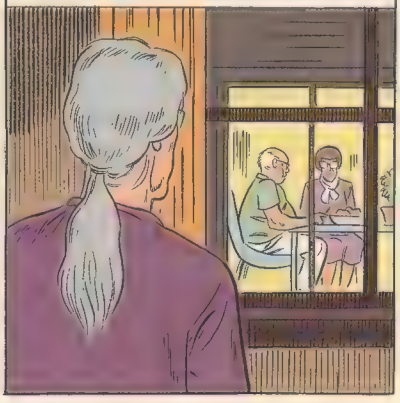
ABOUT A YEAR AFTER PENNY DIED, I EXCHANGED A FEW EMAILS WITH MY FATHER. IT WAS ALL VERY BLAND AND NON-COMMITAL; "JUST REACHING OUT TO SAY HELLO..." I DEFINITELY WASN'T LOOKING TO OPEN ANOTHER CAN OF WORMS.



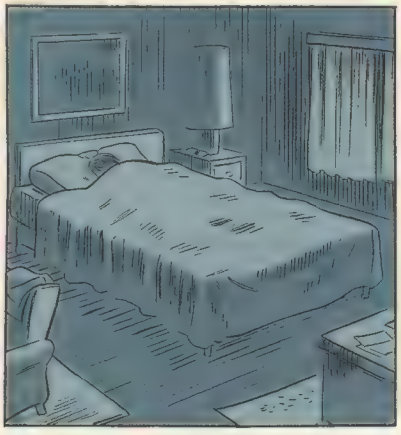
ACCORDING TO PENNY, HE WAS A REAL ASSHOLE- AN ANGRY DRUG ADDICT WHO PRESSURED HER TO GET AN ABORTION AND TOTALLY FREAKED OUT WHEN SHE WENT AHEAD AND HAD ME. "I DON'T REMEMBER A SINGLE REDEEMING FEATURE, BUT WHO KNOWS? IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO."



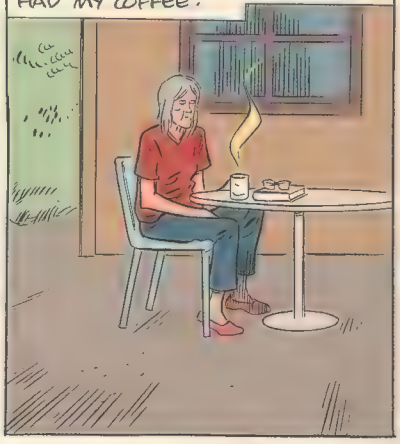
MY FAVORITE RENTERS, THE STRAUSSES, HAD TAKEN OVER THE HOUSE, AS THEY DID EVERY JULY. THEY ALWAYS INVITED AN ARRAY OF SPECIAL GUESTS - RUSSIAN PHYSICISTS, THEOSOPHISTS, ETC. - TO STAY FOR A FEW NIGHTS EACH IN THE SPARE BEDROOM.



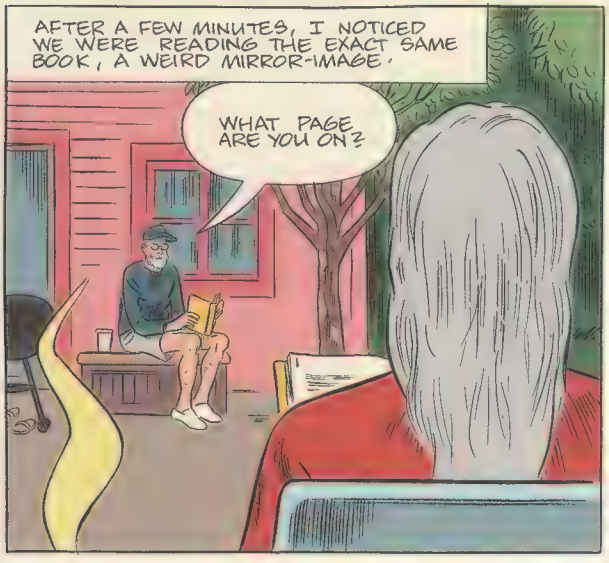
THEIR FIRST VISITOR HAD BEEN THERE MANY TIMES BEFORE - A LOVABLE RETIRED MAGICIAN AND HIS CRAZY DOG (TOTALLY NOT ALLOWED, HA HA) - BUT HE LEFT RIGHT AFTER DINNER WITHOUT SO MUCH AS A COIN TRICK.



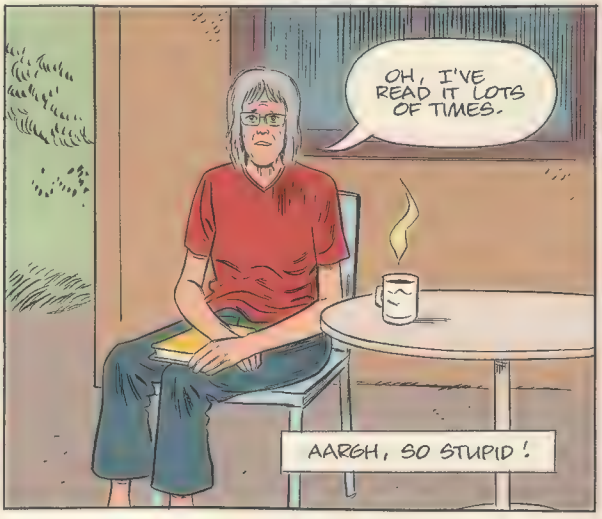
BY THE NEXT MORNING, THE NEW GUEST HAD ALREADY ARRIVED (NOBODY I RECOGNIZED). I GAVE HIM A LITTLE NOD, BUT DIDN'T FEEL LIKE TALKING BEFORE I'D HAD MY COFFEE.

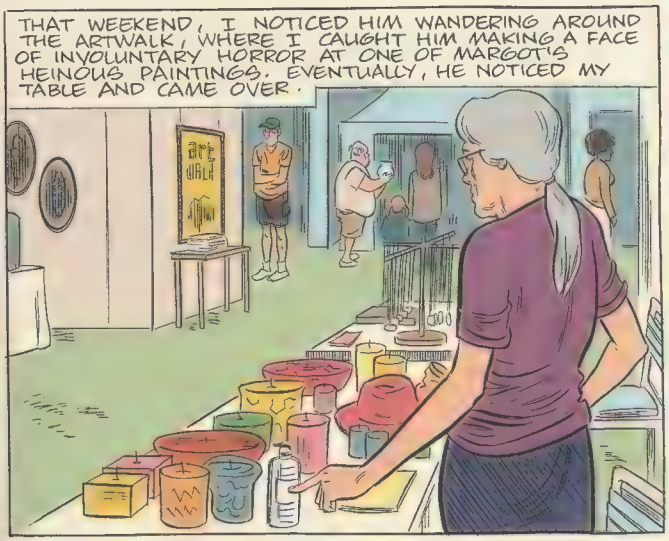


AFTER A FEW MINUTES, I NOTICED WE WERE READING THE EXACT SAME BOOK, A WEIRD MIRROR-IMAGE.



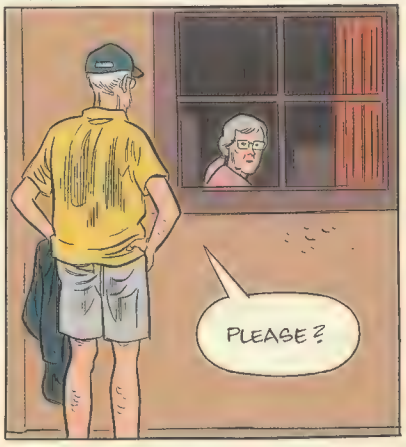
I WAS SUDDENLY THROWN INTO A PANIC. ANY HINT OF THE UNCANNY TRIGGERED MY ANXIETY.

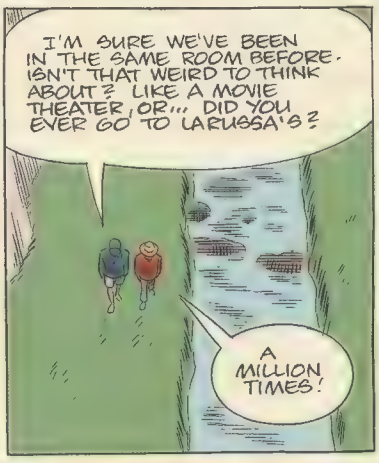



THAT WEEKEND, I NOTICED HIM WANDERING AROUND THE ARTWALK, WHERE I CAUGHT HIM MAKING A FACE OF INVOLUNTARY HORROR AT ONE OF MARGOT'S HEINOUS PAINTINGS. EVENTUALLY, HE NOTICED MY TABLE AND CAME OVER.
art walk

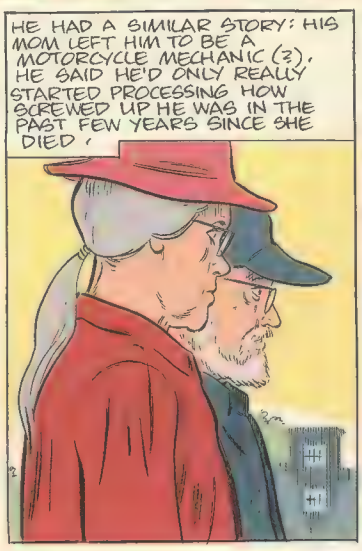
THESE ARE VERY BEAUTIFUL... ARE THEY YOURS?
HOW MUCH?
I COULD TELL HE REALLY MEANT IT. COMPLIMENTS ARE WORTHLESS IN THE ARTS & CRAFTS GAME. ONLY MONEY TALKS.

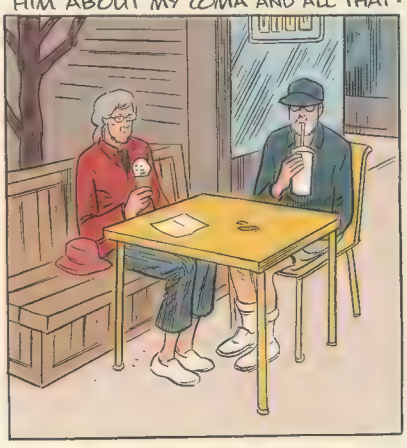
DID YOU EVER SEE THAT NEW YORKER COVER WHERE TWO PEOPLE ARE READING THE SAME BOOK ON THE SUBWAY?
OH, IT'S YOU!


THE NEXT DAY, HE STOPPED BY DURING LUNCH. THE STRAUSSES HAD GONE TO LOS DORITOS FOR THE DAY AND HE WANTED TO SEE IF I HAD TIME TO "HANG OUT."
PLEASE?


HIS NAME WAS STAN. HE WAS MY EXACT AGE AND WE'D LIVED IN MANY OF THE SAME PLACES OVER THE YEARS.
I'M SURE WE'VE BEEN IN THE SAME ROOM BEFORE. ISN'T THAT WEIRD TO THINK ABOUT? LIKE A MOVIE THEATER, OR... DID YOU EVER GO TO LARISSA'S?
A MILLION TIMES!

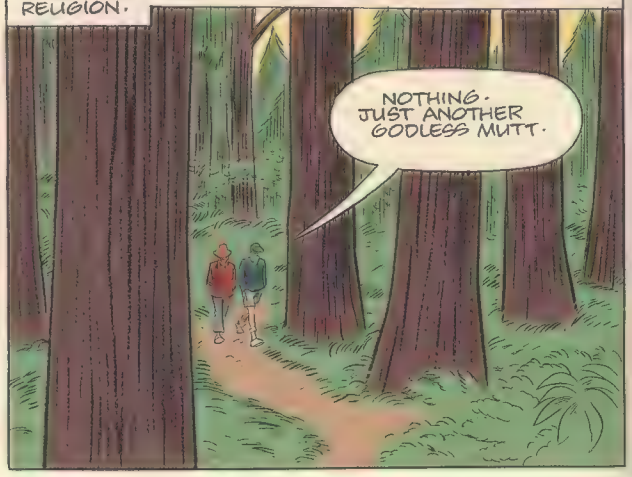
WHEN WE GOT AROUND TO TALKING ABOUT CHILDHOOD, I TOLD HIM PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING.


HE HAD A SIMILAR STORY: HIS MOM LEFT HIM TO BE A MOTORCYCLE MECHANIC (?). HE SAID HE'D ONLY REALLY STARTED PROCESSING HOW SCREWED UP HE WAS IN THE PAST FEW YEARS SINCE SHE DIED.

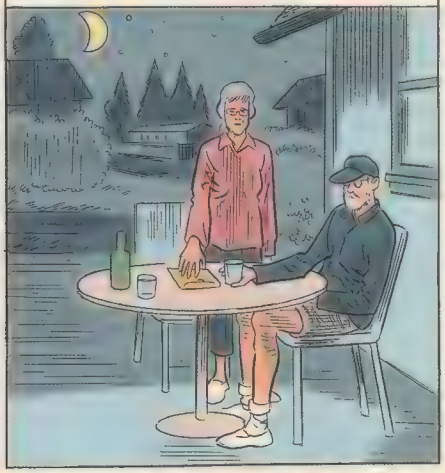

LIKE ME, HE HAD NO FAMILY LEFT. I GOT THE IDEA THERE WAS MAYBE SOME TRAGIC EVENT HE DIDN'T WANT TO GO INTO, JUST AS I WASN'T QUITE READY TO TELL HIM ABOUT MY COMA AND ALL THAT.

I HAD LONG AGO GIVEN UP TRYING TO EXPLAIN MY LIFE TO OTHER PEOPLE - THEY ALWAYS SEEMED TO GLAZE OVER AT THE INTRICACIES OF THE NARRATIVE - BUT STAN WAS DIFFERENT.

WE BOTH FELT SORT-OF VAGUE AND ANONYMOUS, UNMOORED FROM ANY REAL CULTURE, HERITAGE, OR RELIGION.

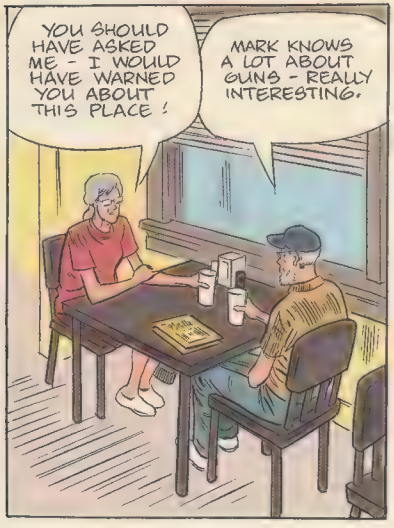


THAT NIGHT, I GAVE HIM SOME OF MY STORIES, BUT MADE HIM PROMISE NOT TO READ ANYTHING UNTIL HE WENT HOME.

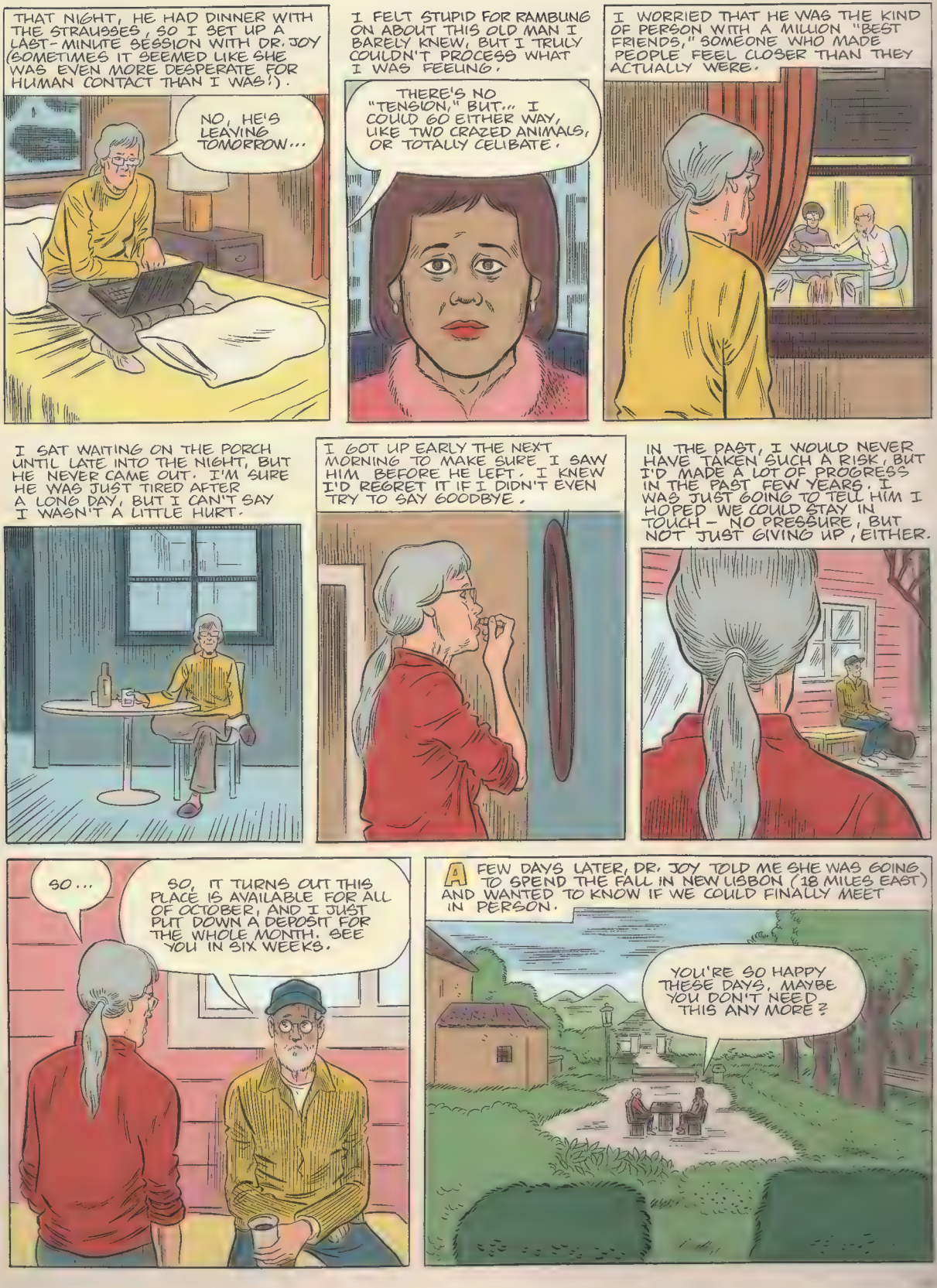


THE NEXT MORNING, I SLEPT WAY TOO LATE. HE'D LEFT A NOTE UNDER MY DOOR ASKING ME TO MEET HIM AT THE VILLAGE GRILLE.

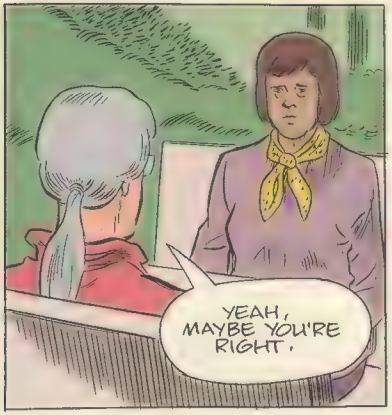
I HADN'T BEEN TO THE GRILLE IN YEARS. ONLY LOCAL ASSHOLES AND YELP-LESS TOURISTS BOTHERED WITH IT, "POOR STAN," I THOUGHT, BUT WHEN I GOT THERE, HE WAS LAUGHING IT UP WITH LITTLE MARK.



HE TOLD ME HE WAS LEAVING THE NEXT DAY ("THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING!"). I SUDDENLY WONDERED WHAT HE REALLY THOUGHT OF ME AND IF I'D EVER SEE HIM AGAIN.

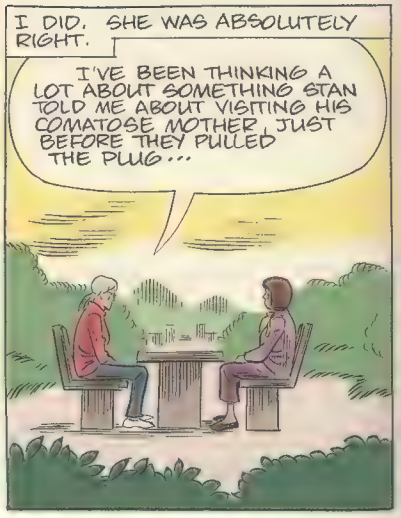

THAT NIGHT, HE HAD DINNER WITH THE STRAUSSES, SO I SET UP A LAST-MINUTE SESSION WITH DR. JOY (SOMETIMES IT SEEMED LIKE SHE WAS EVEN MORE DESPERATE FOR HUMAN CONTACT THAN I WAS!).
NO, HE'S LEAVING TOMORROW...
I FELT STUPID FOR RAMBLING ON ABOUT THIS OLD MAN I BARELY KNEW, BUT I TRULY COULDN'T PROCESS WHAT I WAS FEELING.
THERE'S NO "TENSION," BUT... I COULD GO EITHER WAY, LIKE TWO CRAZED ANIMALS, OR TOTALLY CELIBATE.
I WORRIED THAT HE WAS THE KIND OF PERSON WITH A MILLION "BEST FRIENDS," SOMEONE WHO MADE PEOPLE FEEL CLOSER THAN THEY ACTUALLY WERE.
I SAT WAITING ON THE PORCH UNTIL LATE INTO THE NIGHT, BUT HE NEVER CAME OUT. I'M SURE HE WAS JUST TIRED AFTER A LONG DAY, BUT I CAN'T SAY I WASN'T A LITTLE HURT.
I GOT UP EARLY THE NEXT MORNING TO MAKE SURE I SAW HIM BEFORE HE LEFT. I KNEW I'D REGRET IT IF I DIDN'T EVEN TRY TO SAY GOODBYE.
IN THE PAST, I WOULD NEVER HAVE TAKEN SUCH A RISK, BUT I'D MADE A LOT OF PROGRESS IN THE PAST FEW YEARS. I WAS JUST GOING TO TELL HIM I HOPED WE COULD STAY IN TOUCH — NO PRESSURE, BUT NOT JUST GIVING UP, EITHER.
SO...
SO, IT TURNS OUT THIS PLACE IS AVAILABLE FOR ALL OF OCTOBER, AND I JUST PUT DOWN A DEPOSIT FOR THE WHOLE MONTH. SEE YOU IN SIX WEEKS.
A FEW DAYS LATER, DR. JOY TOLD ME SHE WAS GOING TO SPEND THE FALL IN NEW LISBON (18 MILES EAST) AND WANTED TO KNOW IF WE COULD FINALLY MEET IN PERSON.
YOU'RE SO HAPPY THESE DAYS. MAYBE YOU DON'T NEED THIS ANY MORE?

IT WAS SO WEIRD TALKING TO HER IN PERSON. THE ENERGY WAS TOTALLY OFF. PEOPLE REALLY ARE ENTIRELY DIFFERENT WHEN YOU CAN SEE THEIR LITTLE "TELLS."



I THINK YOU'VE MADE HUGE STRIDES SINCE WE STARTED, BUT THERE ARE STILL SOME TENDER AREAS YOU SEEM TO DANCE AROUND WHEN THEY COME UP. DO YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT?

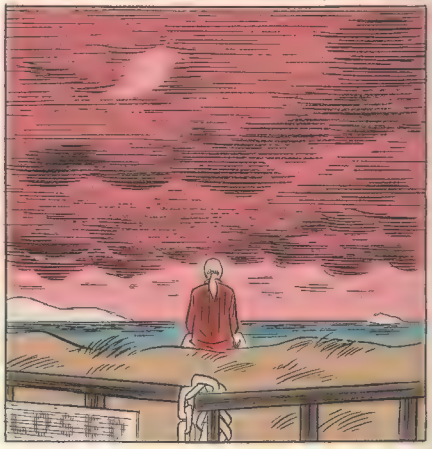
I DID. SHE WAS ABSOLUTELY RIGHT.


I'VE BEEN THINKING A LOT ABOUT SOMETHING STAN TOLD ME ABOUT VISITING HIS COMATOSE MOTHER, JUST BEFORE THEY PULLED THE PLUG...

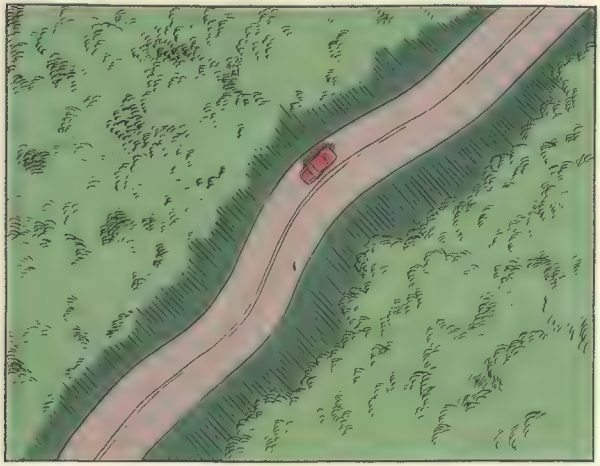
HE'D NEVER SAID AN ANGRY WORD TO HER, TOTALLY TERRIFIED OF REJECTION. BUT HERE WAS HIS CHANCE. AS HE TOLD HER HIS HONEST FEELINGS FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE NOTICED A LOOK OF ANGUISH ON HER FACE, EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS FUNCTIONALLY BRAIN-DEAD. HE SAID IT STAYED FROZEN ON HER FACE EVEN AFTER SHE WAS GONE.

I KNEW I HAD TO RISK A SIMILAR WOUND IF I WANTED TO FULLY COMMIT TO THIS (POTENTIALLY) HAPPY NEW PHASE. NO MORE DANCING AROUND.

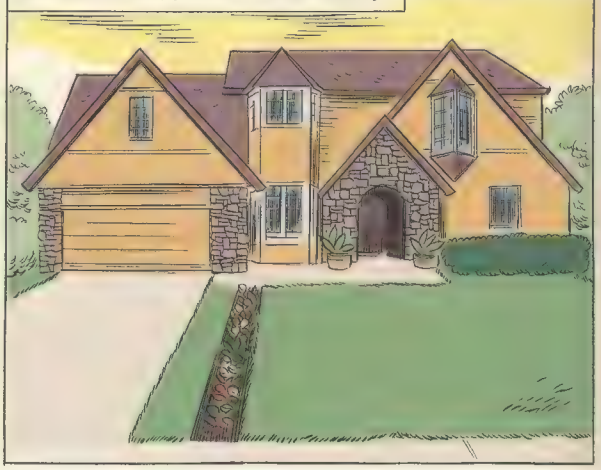
WHY HAD PENNY KEPT ME FROM MY REAL FATHER? WAS THERE SOMETHING MORE TO THE STORY? THERE HAD TO BE, RIGHT? WHY HAD I TOLD MYSELF IT DIDN'T MATTER?



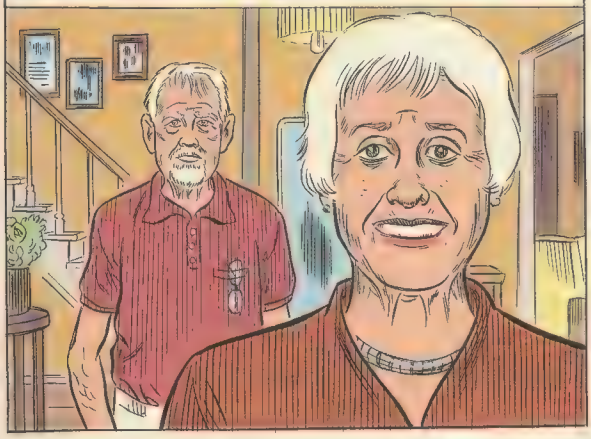
HE'D LIVED BASICALLY MY ENTIRE LIFE, IT TURNED OUT, IN A GOLF-Y EXURB SIXTY MILES SOUTH OF MY GRANDPARENTS' HOUSE. I'D PROBABLY DRIVEN PAST HIM ON THE FREEWAY, OR SOLD HIM SHOES WHEN I WORKED AT SPORTFARM.

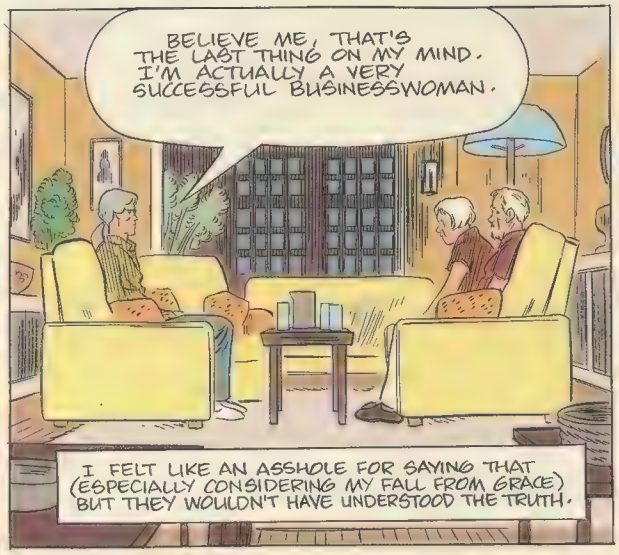


IT TOOK ME EIGHTEEN HOURS OF DRIVING OVER TWO DAYS, AND I HAD A LOT OF TIME TO THINK. HAD DR. JOY BEEN TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING DEEPER THAN JUST ANOTHER "X" ON MY PARENTAL-MYSTERY CHECKLIST?

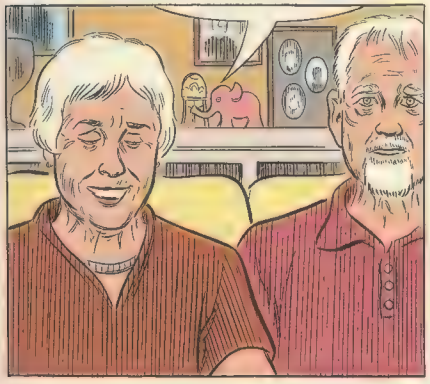


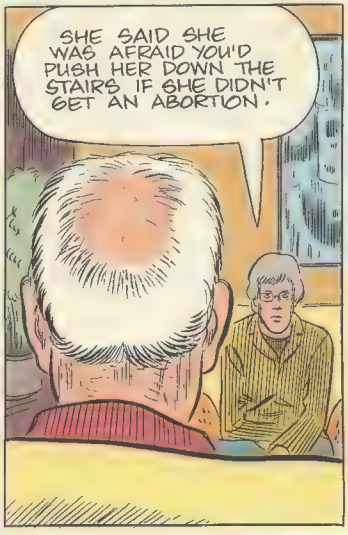
I COULD SEE A MILD RESEMBLANCE, BUT FELT ABSOLUTELY NO CONNECTION. HIS WIFE WAS PROTECTIVE, FULL OF DISDAIN FOR PENNY (NOT UNFAIR), AND CLEARLY SAW ME AS A SHADY OPPORTUNIST, LOOKING TO GUILT-TRIP A LAST-MINUTE SPOT IN DADDY'S WILL.

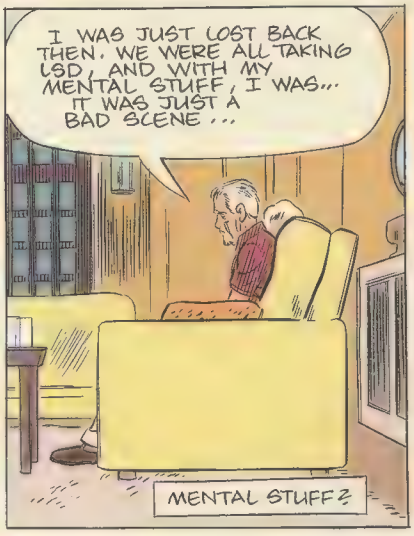



BELIEVE ME, THAT'S THE LAST THING ON MY MIND. I'M ACTUALLY A VERY SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSWOMAN.
I FELT LIKE AN ASSHOLE FOR SAYING THAT (ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING MY FALL FROM GRACE) BUT THEY WOULDN'T HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE TRUTH.

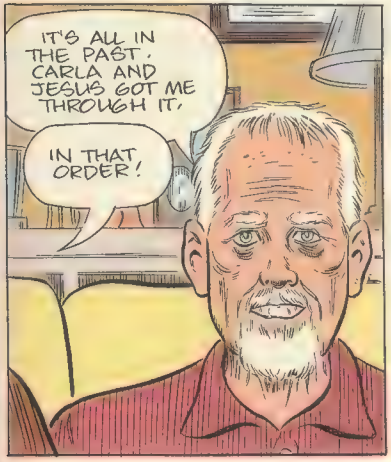
STEVE AND CARLA HAD RAISED THREE KIDS (WHO SOUNDED AWFUL) AND LED A NORMAL LIFE. EVERY WORD THEY SAID SEEMED DESIGNED TO DULL ANY POSSIBLE TENSION, WHICH MADE ME ALL THE MORE DETERMINED TO UNEARTH THE RAVING DEMON PENNY DESCRIBED.





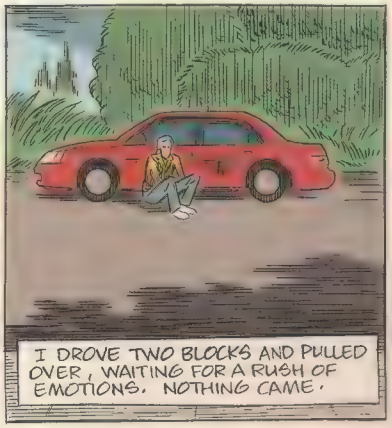


IT SOUNDED LIKE HE'D HAD SOME KIND OF BREAKDOWN, BUT THERE'D NEVER BEEN ANY REAL DIAGNOSIS OR TREATMENT.

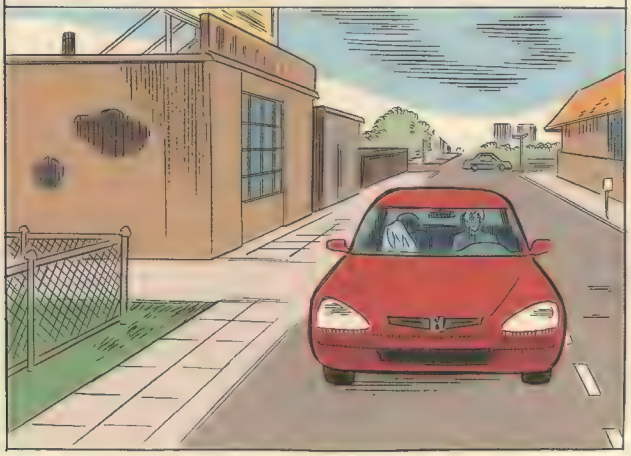


HOW COME YOU NEVER TRIED TO FIND ME? DID YOU EVEN KNOW I WAS BORN?
I WAS EXPECTING HIM TO ARGUE, MAKE EXCUSES, SOMETHING, BUT HE JUST SMILED, LIKE, "OOPS," LIKE IT HAD NEVER OCCURRED TO HIM.

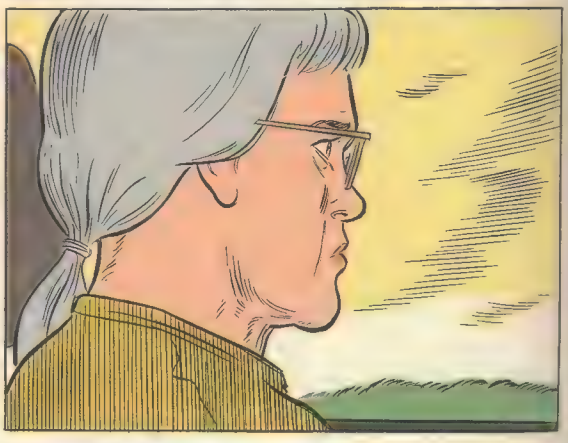
I TRIED TONING IT DOWN IN THE HOPE THAT HE MIGHT OPEN UP A BIT, BUT SOON THEIR PRACTICED BANALITY BECAME TOO EXCRUCIATING AND I HAD TO ESCAPE.



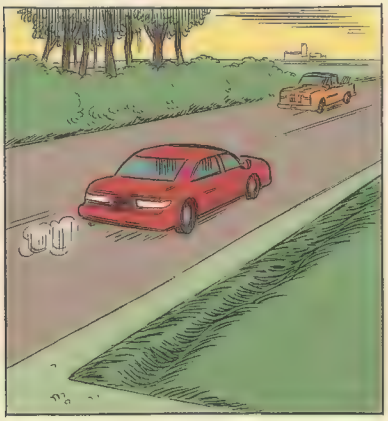
MY FIRST IMPULSE WAS TO HEAD STRAIGHT HOME, OR MAYBE I'D STOP AT SOME RUNDOWN MOTEL AND HOPE TO GET MURDERED LIKE MARION CRANE. AT LEAST THAT WOULD FEEL LIKE SOMETHING.



IT'S QUITE A BLOW TO DISCOVER AFTER A LIFETIME OF FAIRY-TALE FANTASIES THAT YOU'RE NOT REALLY SPECIAL, JUST THE UNWANTED FETUS OF TWO RANDOM FUCK-UPS CAUGHT IN A CONFUSING HISTORICAL MOMENT.



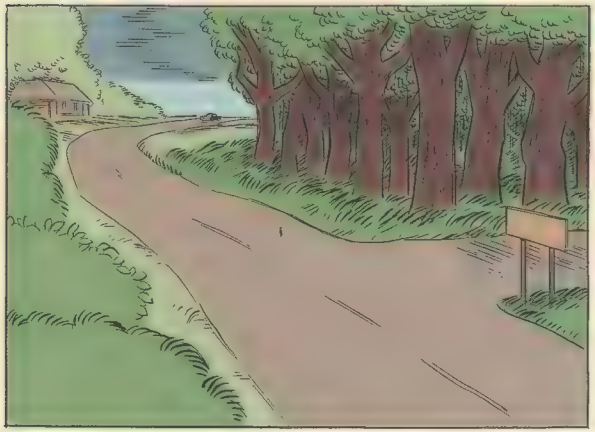
IN A WAY, PENNY HAD GIVEN ME THE BEST POSSIBLE LIFE. SHE'D PROTECTED ME BOTH FROM STEVE AND HERSELF. SHE'D ALLOWED ME TO INVENT MY OWN PROVENANCE.



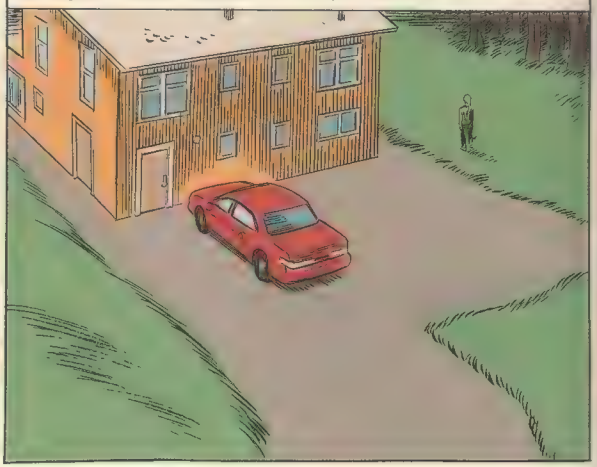
I DROVE ON IN A DAZE, UNWILLING TO FACE THE BLACK EMPTINESS THAT MIGHT (OR MIGHT NOT) OVERTAKE ME IF/WHEN I STOPPED MOVING, AND EVENTUALLY FOUND MYSELF ON A FAMILIAR STRETCH OF HIGHWAY.

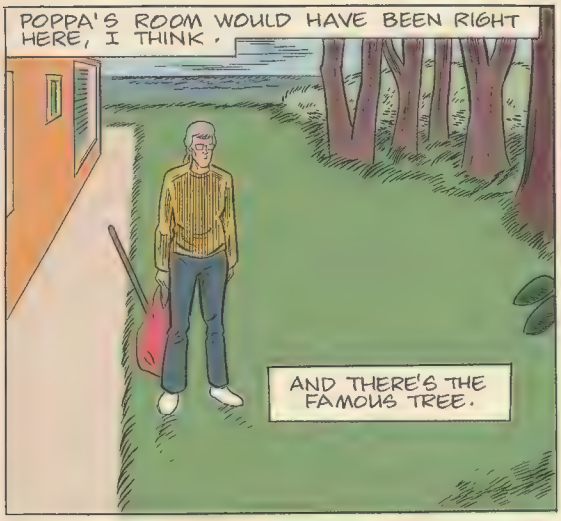
IT WAS ONLY 120 MILES OUT OF MY WAY. IN A FEW HOURS, I COULD CLEAR UP THE LAST OF THE MYSTERIES, ARM MYSELF WITH THE SOBER TRUTH I NEEDED TO TAKE THAT NEXT STEP.

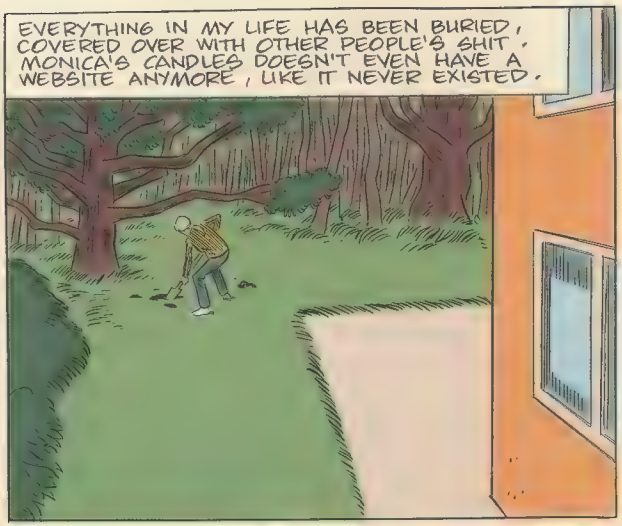
THE MAIN ROAD WAS A BIT WIDER AND THERE WERE TONS OF NEW HOUSES. BAUER'S STORE WAS NOW A GAS STATION/QUIZNOS BUT THERE WAS A CUTE-LOOKING NEW CAFE BY THE TURN-OFF. I COULD STOP THERE FOR DINNER BEFORE HEADING HOME.

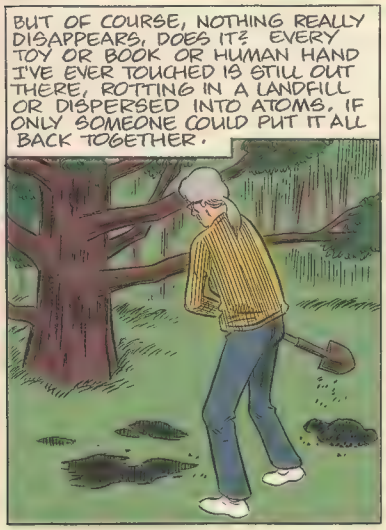


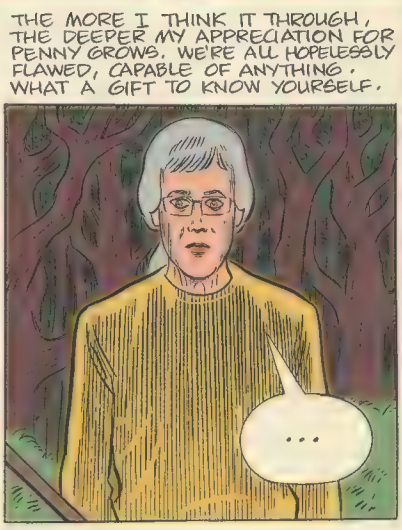
THE OLD HOUSE IS INDEED GONE. I KNEW THAT, OF COURSE, BUT IT'S STILL WEIRD TO SEE. THE NEW BUILDING IS BLAND, BUT IT COULD BE WORSE. FOUR GENERIC RENTAL UNITS.

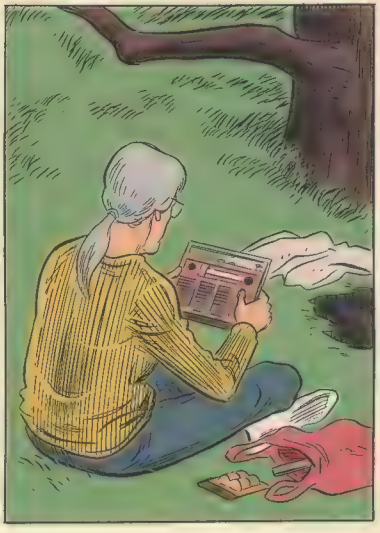


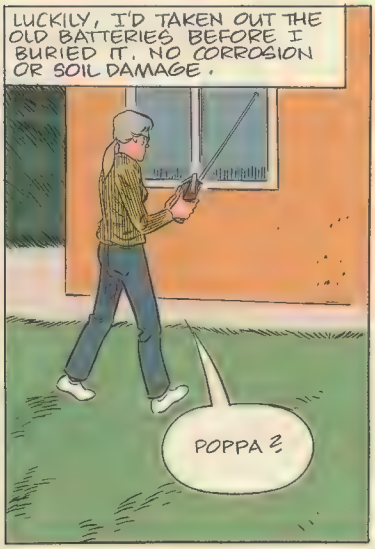

POPPA'S ROOM WOULD HAVE BEEN RIGHT HERE, I THINK.
AND THERE'S THE FAMOUS TREE.

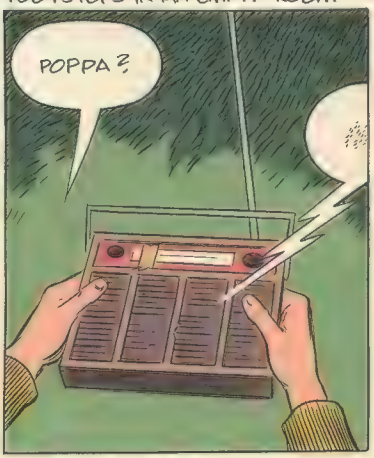

EVERYTHING IN MY LIFE HAS BEEN BURIED, COVERED OVER WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S SHIT. MONICA'S CANDLES DOESN'T EVEN HAVE A WEBSITE ANYMORE, LIKE IT NEVER EXISTED.


BUT OF COURSE, NOTHING REALLY DISAPPEARS, DOES IT? EVERY TOY OR BOOK OR HUMAN HAND I'VE EVER TOUCHED IS STILL OUT THERE, ROTTING IN A LANDFILL OR DISPERSED INTO ATOMS, IF ONLY SOMEONE COULD PUT IT ALL BACK TOGETHER.


THE MORE I THINK IT THROUGH, THE DEEPER MY APPRECIATION FOR PENNY GROWS. WE'RE ALL HOPELESSLY FLAWED, CAPABLE OF ANYTHING. WHAT A GIFT TO KNOW YOURSELF.
...




LUCKILY, I'D TAKEN OUT THE OLD BATTERIES BEFORE I BURIED IT. NO CORROSION OR SOIL DAMAGE.
POPPA?


IT'S STILL SET ON THE RIGHT STATION, MARKED WITH A PIECE OF TAPE. I CAN HEAR A SORT-OF HOLLOW SOUND, LIKE FOOTSTEPS IN AN EMPTY ROOM.
POPPA?

IT ISN'T POPPA, BUT A DIFFERENT VOICE - AN OLD BRITISH MAN. HE TELLS ME TO WALK INTO THE WOODS.
HELLO?
HELLO?

THE VOICE INSTRUCTS ME TO LOOK FOR A SPECIFIC PATCH OF GROUND DEEP IN THE FOREST, A SMALL CLEARING NEAR A TRIO OF ROTTED OAKS.

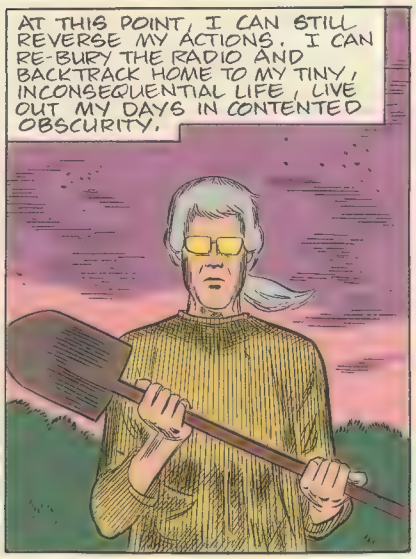
ONCE I GET TO THE EXACT SPOT, HE TELLS ME TO START DIGGING.

NOW THERE ARE SEVERAL VOICES, ALL SPEAKING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES; NOTHING I CAN UNDERSTAND OR CLASSIFY.

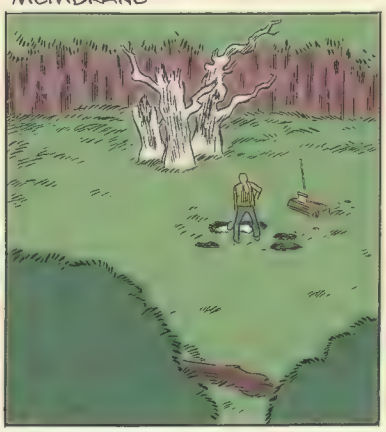
FINALLY, I HIT SOMETHING - A STRANGE, EGGLIKE SURFACE WITH COLORFUL, GEOMETRIC MARKINGS.

A NEW VOICE - HIGH-PITCHED, WITH AN ODD, OLD-FASHIONED CADENCE - TELLS ME TO BREAK THROUGH THE OUTER SHELL WITH MY SHOVEL.

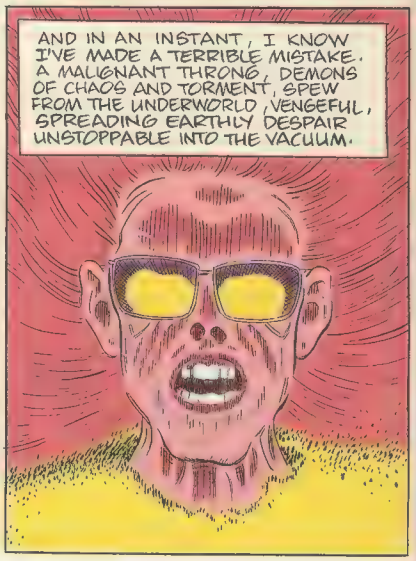
AT THIS POINT, I CAN STILL REVERSE MY ACTIONS. I CAN RE-BURY THE RADIO AND BACKTRACK HOME TO MY TINY, INCONSEQUENTIAL LIFE, LIVE OUT MY DAYS IN CONTENTED OBSCURITY.



A SWARM OF HUMMINGBIRDS APPEARS IN THE SKY. I HEAR MORE VOICES, A MADDENING CACOPHONY, RISING IN PANDEMONIAC FERVOR AS I CHIP THROUGH THE STRANGE MEMBRANE.



AND IN AN INSTANT, I KNOW I'VE MADE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE. A MALIGNANT THRONG, DEMONS OF CHAOS AND TORMENT, SPEW FROM THE UNDERWORLD, VENGEFUL, SPREADING EARTHLY DESPAIR UNSTOPPABLE INTO THE VACUUM.



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